

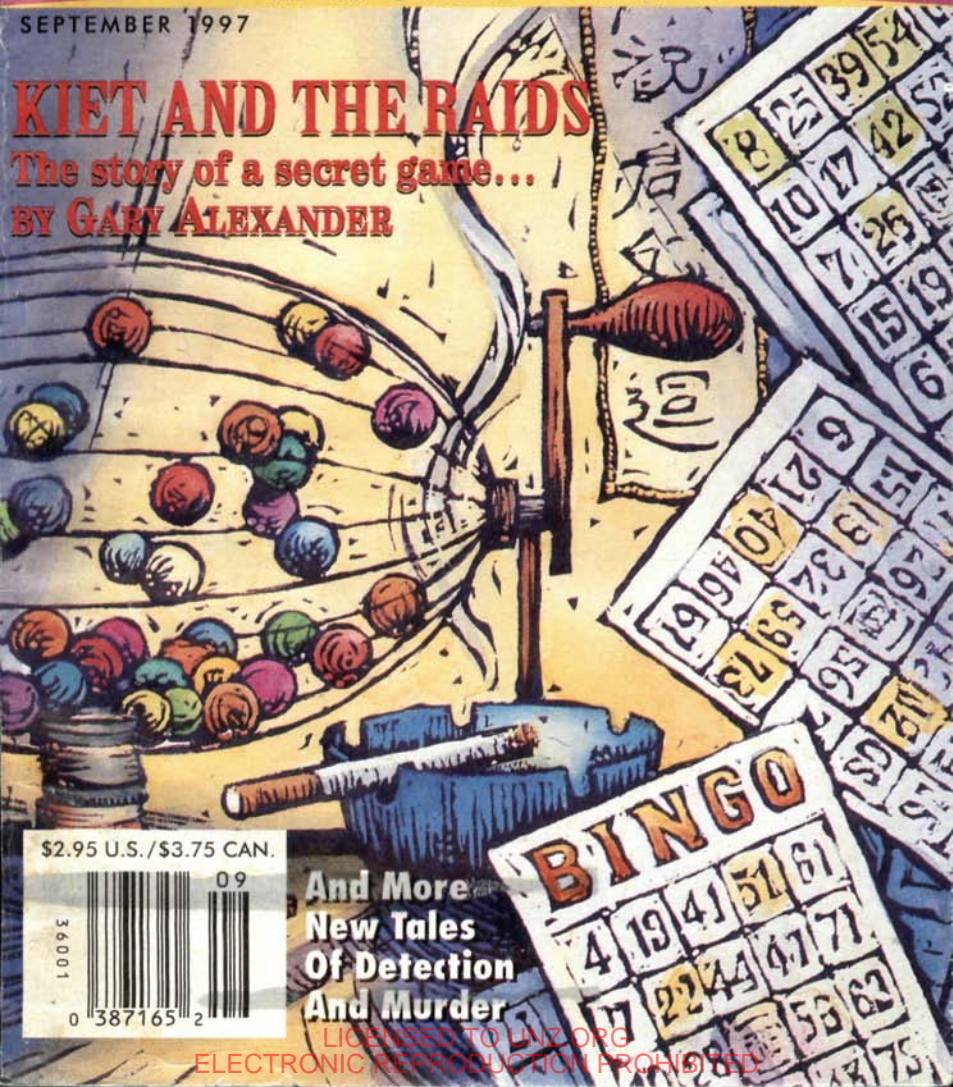
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SEPTEMBER 1997

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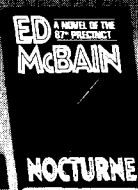
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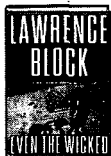
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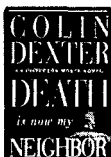
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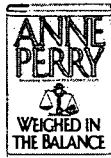
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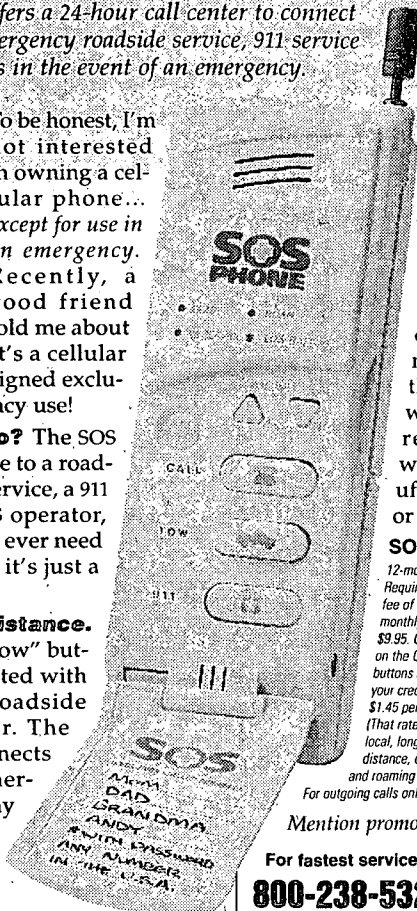
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Edgar time has arrived again, that annual evening when the Mystery Writers of America present Edgar Allan Poe awards to writers for work done in the preceding year. As always, the presentation was made at a banquet in New York, this year on May first at the Hilton. It is a gala occasion (the invitations read "Dress to kill") preceded by a cocktail party and surrounded by several days of festivities. Following are the nominees in all categories. The winners are listed first, in boldface type:

BEST NOVEL OF 1996:

The Chatham School Affair
by Thomas H. Cook, Bantam
With Child by Laurie R. King,
St. Martin's
Hearts and Bones by Margaret
Lawrence, Avon

Pentecost Alley by Anne Perry,
Fawcett/Columbine
Mean Streak by Carolyn Wheat,
Berkley

BEST FIRST NOVEL BY AN AMERICAN AUTHOR:

Simple Justice by John Morgan Wilson, Doubleday
Bonita Faye by Margaret Moseley, Three Forks Press
The Queen's Man by Sharon Kay Penman, Henry Holt
A Test of Wills by Charles Todd, St. Martin's
A Brother's Blood by Michael White, HarperCollins

BEST PAPERBACK ORIGINAL:

Fade Away by Harlan Coben, Dell
Silent Words by Joan M. Drury, Spinsters Ink
The Grass Widow by Teri Holbrook, Bantam

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Walking Rain by Susan Wade, Bantam
Tribe by R. D. Zimmerman, Dell

BEST SHORT STORY:

"Red Clay" by Michael Malone, *Murder for Love*, Delacorte

"My Murder" by David Corn, *Unusual Suspects*, Vintage

"The Dark Snow" by Brendan DuBois, *Playboy*, November

"Kiss the Sky" by James Grady, *Unusual Suspects*, Vintage

"Hoop" by S. J. Rozan, *EQMM*, January

BEST YOUNG ADULT MYSTERY:

***Twisted Summer* by Willo Davis Roberts, Atheneum**

Who Killed Mr. Chippendale? by Mel Glenn, Lodestar

Mr. Was by Peter Hautman, Simon & Schuster

Flyers by Daniel Hayes, Simon & Schuster

Hawk Moon by Rob McGregor, Simon & Schuster

BEST JUVENILE MYSTERY:

***The Clearing* by Dorothy Reynolds Miller, Atheneum**

The Last Piper by Helen Cavanaugh, Simon & Schuster

The Case of the Wiggling Wig by E. W. Hildick, Simon & Schuster

Gaps in Stone Walls by John Neufeld, Atheneum

Cousins in the Castle by Barbara Brooks Wallace, Atheneum

BEST FACT CRIME:

***Power to Hurt* by Darcy O'Brien, HarperCollins**

Outrage by Vincent Bugliosi, Norton

Fall Guys by Jim Fisher, Southern Illinois University Press

No Matter How Loud I Shout by Edward Humes, Simon & Schuster

Trespasses by Howard Swindle, Viking

BEST CRITICAL/BIOGRAPHICAL WORK:

***The Secret Marriage of Sherlock Holmes* by Michael Atkinson, University of Michigan Press**

Detecting Women 2: A Reader's Guide and Checklist for Mystery Series Written by Women by Willetta L. Heising, Purple Moon Press

The Blues Detective: A Study of African-American Detective Fiction by Stephen F. Soitos, University of Massachusetts Press

Agatha Christie: A to Z by Dawn B. Sova, Facts on File
Elusion Aforethought: The Life and Writing of Anthony Berkeley Cox by Malcolm J. Turnbull, Bowling Green State University Press

BEST MOTION PICTURE:

***Sling Blade* by Billy Bob Thornton, Miramax**

Le Cérémonie by Claude Chabrol, ACO Productions with MK2 Productions

Fargo by Joel and Ethan Coen, Gramercy

Trainspotting by John Hodge, Miramax

Lone Star by John Sayles, Castle Rock/Columbia

BEST TELEVISION FEATURE OR MINISERIES:

"Brotherly Love," *Cracker*, by Jimmy McGovern, A&E

"Best Boys," *Cracker*, by Paul Abbott, A&E

"True Romance," *Cracker*, by Paul Abbott, A&E

"An Autumn Shroud," *Dalziel & Pascoe*, by Malcolm Bradbury, A&E

"Darkness Visible," *Silent Witness*, by Ashley Pharoah, A&E

BEST TELEVISION EPISODE:

"Deadbeat," *Law & Order*, by Ed Zuckerman and I. C. Rapoport, NBC

"Slave," *Law & Order*, by Rene Balcer and Elaine Loeser, NBC

"Causa Mortis," *Law & Order*, by Rene Balcer, NBC

"Every Picture Tells a Story," *EZ Streets*, by Paul Haggis, CBS

"ID," *Law & Order*, by Ed Zuckerman, NBC

This year's Grand Master: Ruth Rendell. The Ellery Queen Award went to François Guérif, and a Special Raven was presented to Marvin Lachman. The Robert L. Fish Award for Best First Short Story went to "The Prosecutor of DuPrey" by David Vaughn, *EQMM*, January.

We bring you two new writers this time—Cathy Sahu, author of "Mean Mr. Mullins," and Sandra Salazar, coauthor of "A Matter of Principle"—who have several things in common. Both stories are first mysteries; both authors live in California, and both are nurses. Welcome to both!

We also want to "introduce" Carolyn Wells, author of our Mystery Classic. In *A Catalogue of Crime*, Barzun and Taylor say: "The vogue of the genre owes much to this gentle American lady [who wrote] the first theoretical treatise on the form [*The Technique of the Mystery Story*, 1913]. . . . The pioneer work on the genre . . . this manual shows her as extremely tough-minded and superbly critical." She wrote seventy-five mystery novels.

FICTION

Kiet and the Raids

Gary Alexander

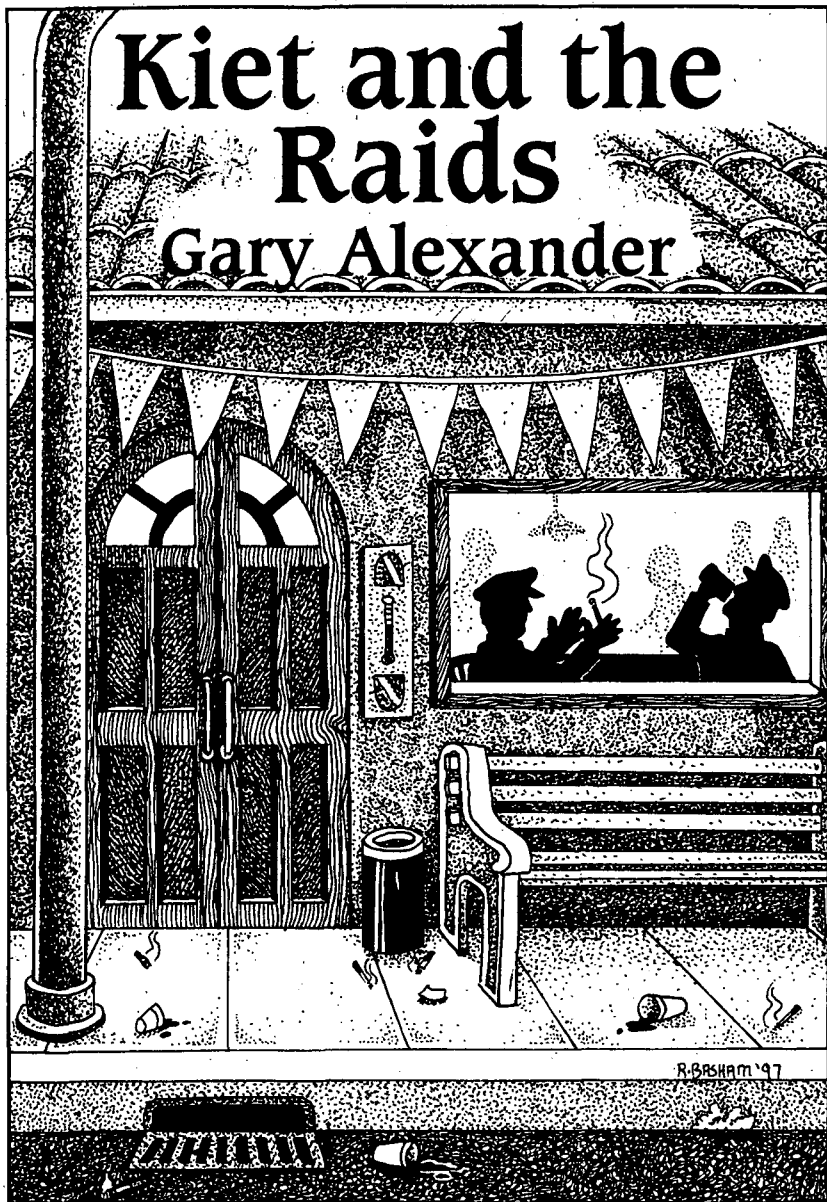


Illustration by Ray Basham

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/97

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“Mist coming off the river,” Captain Binh said. “Fog-horns from the rice barges. Dim light and dark shadows. Nobody around unless you count a drunk or three passed out in doorways. Is this a perfect night for a raid or what?”

Superintendent of Police Bamsan Kiet sniffed raw sewage in the Ma San River mist. The light was bad because two of three streetlights had been broken out. And nobody lucid was nearby because it was late in one of Hickorn’s worst areas. As far as Kiet was concerned, it was not a perfect night for anything. He did not reply.

“Superintendent, I realize we came up empty the last two tries, but that’s no reason to be negative. You, me, the three uniforms with us, and maybe six other HPD officers know my contact tipped me two hours ago.”

One plus one plus three plus six. Eleven members of the Hickorn Police Department who were also citizens of the Kingdom of Luong. Rumormongering and gossip were ingrained Luongan traits. Eleven Luongans and two hours to reveal a secret they would swear on their mothers’ graves never to divulge. By now it could have reached throughout Luong, Kiet knew, not to mention Tierra del Fuego,

Baffin Island, and Ganymede. Kiet remained silent.

The raiding party had parked their motor scooters in a park on Ma San Boulevard and were making their way to the warehouse on foot, Captain Binh leading them to their target. At a five-way intersection a block away, he stopped, raised his hand, and said, “Okay, I’m recommending we split up here, the uniforms cut up the alley, slip across on Avenue John F. Kennedy, head up that alley halfway to Avenue Margaret Thatcher, which positions them to cover the rear and side exits, and us, we’ll just take Rue Ho Chi Minh and bust in the front, if that’s okay with you, superintendent, that is, after we synchronize our watches, right?”

“Splendid,” Kiet said, marveling again at Binh’s vast, rapid-fire sentences. His youthful adjutant had studied police science for one year in the United States of America, at their Washington, D.C., jurisdiction. Besides wondrous tales of V-8 powered squad cars, sting operations, and cop groupies, he had lugged home as excess baggage aggressive speech patterns and American slang.

“I’ve got nine oh-seven—mark,” Binh said.

The uniforms set their watches.

“Okay, fellas, at nine fifteen

be ready. The superintendent and I are going in. We're gonna give some scumbag gamblers a super bad evening."

M-1 carbines held at port arms, the officers tentatively stepped into the alleyway blackness. Binh strode toward Rue Ho Chi Minh, and Kiet struggled to keep up.

As usual the lean young Binh was dressed impeccably in whites. He was lithe, handsome, and intense. His patent leather shoes, belt, and holster reflected the occasional functioning streetlamp. Golden captain's pips glinted on shoulderboards like gemstones.

As usual the superintendent was carelessly garbed in slacks, white shirt, and sandals. He was unarmed. Bamsan Kiet was a tall, meaty widower of middle age. He had twice the years and girth of his second-in-command.

Binh crossed Avenue Kennedy, tiptoed up to the vacant warehouse, and cupped an ear against a window. Kiet caught up as Binh unsnapped his holster and whispered, "I don't hear anything, but there's lights on."

Kiet squinted at the glass, which was nearly opaque, encrusted with neglect. He saw faint yellow shafts through the filth and recalled that the building had once stored cotton.

"I see it. Yes."

Binh bent his arm stiffly horizontal, staring at his watch. Kiet was reminded old movies, of commandos timing the initiation of attacks on Nazi heavy water plants.

"Nine thirteen and change," Binh muttered. "Ready, superintendent?"

Kiet hesitated.

The Kingdom of Luong does not exist. It is an imaginary Southeast Asian backwater surrounded by Laos, Burma, China, and Thailand. A former French colony, Luong is known as the Fourth Indochina after the three actual states of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The kingdom gained independence in 1954 and has been ruled from that date by eighty-four-year-old Prince Novisad Pakse. Hickorn, Luong's capital and only city of note, a languid metropolis of two hundred thirty thousand, is situated in the lush, steamy lowlands on the forementioned Ma San River.

"Superintendent?"

However, since Bamsan Kiet was Hickorn's chief law enforcement officer, fictitiousness was an invalid excuse for not commencing the raid.

"Yes, captain," Kiet said. "Ready."

Binh said, "Shhhhh!," drew his nickel-plated, pearl-handled Colt .45 automatic, and jacked a round into the chamber.

"Captain. Our agreement, our compromise?"

Binh sighed, twirled the pistol, and reholstered. "I remember."

At the two previous raid sites, an aircraft hangar at Hickorn International Airport and the basement of an apartment house, Binh had shot out the door locksets before bursting in. The dramatic entrances had resulted in dangerous ricochets and unnecessary frightening of the sole occupants—bats and rats. In lieu of gunfire, Kiet permitted Binh to kick in the doors henceforth.

"Ten seconds," Binh said. "Stand back."

"Captain, shouldn't we try the doorknob first?"

"A waste of time, but okay, fine, what the hell, why not?"

Kiet turned the knob. He pushed the door open a centimeter. Its hinges creaked.

"They made a big-time mistake," Binh said, drawing his .45 again.

He kicked the door wide, rushed in, both hands on the pistol. "Police! Freeze!"

Yet another District of Columbia technique perfected, Kiet thought, following Binh into a large unoccupied room. The scene was little different from the past two venues. Cigarette smoke clung in the air like smog. On twenty or so card ta-

bles were bottles and cans and cups of unfinished beer, coffee, and soda.

Kiet dipped a finger into a coffee cup. "Warm."

"Damn," Binh said. "Just missed them."

Kiet nodded and looked around. On the tables with the beverages and overflowing ashtrays were wagering sheets. A hastily built structure of framing lumber and plywood stood at the front of the room, a makeshift stage. The gaming paraphernalia had of course fled with their owner.

Binh picked up a wagering sheet and whistled. "Jesus, superintendent, somebody's gonna be brutally pissed. The word to scramble must've come right when they called out the winning number."

Kiet examined the sheet. He could smell the stamping ink on the diagonal row of numerals.

"Bingo," he said.

Avenue Alexandre Loubet honored a nineteenth century French priest who had romanized the Luongan language. The Chineselike ideograms of Old Luongan were incomprehensible to Europeans, therefore pagan. A Christian Bible required a civilized alphabet.

Hickorn Police Headquarters was located at 900 Alexandre

Loubet, a kilometer east of downtown. Two stolid floors of tan stucco, it had served for fifty years as barracks and headquarters for the Indochina Legionnaires. After Independence, the building was inherited by the new government. Deemed too ugly and menacing for ministry offices, it was deeded to the capital's police department.

The interior was a musty acoustical nightmare. Bare lightbulbs cast harsh shadows in hallways that stank of nervous perspiration. It seemed redolent of ghosts of Frenchmen and prisoners driven mad by solitary confinement. HPD HQ scared the hell out of visitors, notably incoming criminals.

Bamsan Kiet loved his headquarters but had no desire to be there tonight. Binh nagged him into it for "mission debriefing," which Kiet took as a synonym for sleep deprivation.

"We have a snitch in the department," Binh said in Kiet's office. "There's no other answer."

Kiet yawned and said, "Tell me again, please, the ways you were alerted to the games."

Binh ticked them off on his fingers. "Typewritten note stuck to my scooter. Phone call, the voice muffled like with a handkerchief. Telegram. No clues, no fingerprints, no nothing. The common denominator is that

this joker knows my routine and tips me too late. We're boogying out of here while the bingo mobsters are packing their toys and splitting."

Kiet was able to translate the gist, if not the context, of individual words. "I fear you are correct regarding the treachery."

Binh rubbed thumb and fingers together. "Obviously the scumbag is being paid generously to hang us out to dry. What I don't get is why he has us nipping at their heels."

"Better us than us," Kiet suggested.

"Huh? You know, sometimes you talk weird, superintendent."

"The pressure on us to break up the floating bingo ring is enormous, is it not?"

"You ain't just whistling Dixie."

Kiet looked at him.

"The heat's on, you're saying. No argument there."

Heat indeed, Kiet thought. Bingo not only flaunted law and authority, it was a political bombshell. The operation had mysteriously appeared several months ago. Public gambling in any form had been illegal in Luong but generally tolerated. Mah-Jongg, dice, cards. Bingo, too, until Luongans embraced it.

Bingo became so popular that

the Luongan National Assembly took an interest. After a three week debate, unprecedented for its brevity, the assembly voted to legalize and regulate the game.

When bingo was a crime, it was a bribable opportunity limited to police officers and judges. Now it was also bribable for petty bureaucrats *and* taxable. The tariffs were stiff, the regulations restrictive. This "victimless crime," as Binh dubbed it, offered something for everyone.

The greedy logic backfired. The legal operators were whacked hard by the tax collector and paid a multitude of outstretched hands to overlook violations of minutiae in the statute book. They collapsed under the weight of their overhead, unable to compete with superior prizes offered by the underground games.

"Continually I receive memoranda and telephone calls from lawmakers and tax authorities and regulators. They order me to crush the outlaws immediately, but not to shoot any player who is too important."

Binh nodded. "Words to live by. When I was in the States, we'd go to the track and play the ponies. That was serious gambling and a super place to hit on chicks, by the way. Bingo players were mostly middle-aged gals with curlers in their hair

who chain smoked. I just don't understand the appeal of bingo to Luongans."

"Aside from the fact that the players are not primarily concerned with meeting young men such as yourself?"

Binh shrugged. "Yeah, well."

"Bingo provides a structured form of recreation that relies on efficiency in recording the numbers, a certain concentration and precision that is lacking in the average Luongan's life."

"I guess that makes sense. But do you know what?"

Kiet shook his head.

"Bingo's basically an American game. It was invented in the basement of a Catholic church in Rochester, New York, in 1921. That's a known fact."

"Splendid."

"How many Americans live in Hickory, superintendent?"

"Perhaps one hundred."

"How many are suspicious?"

"All foreigners are suspicious, captain."

"You know what I mean. This whole situation has American origins. Has to! The rotten apple in HPD, if we could only lay our mitts on the freakin' turkey."

"Better us than us."

"C'mon, superintendent, speak clearly."

"Our adversaries realize the pressure on us to solve the case. They orchestrate the raids. They escape, and we show progress."

"Ah," Binh said. "By being proactive, they pretend to empower us. I think I gotcha. What we do, we take over the game plan and flush out the snitch."

Kiet yawned. "Yes, but tomorrow night."

At the following evening's roll call, Captain Binh announced the raid. All available personnel, he said. Check your weapons and be set to move out in thirty minutes. He paused to allow somebody to ask where. No one did.

He went into Kiet's office, where they waited five minutes. Then they went out and counted heads.

"Where's Corporal Le?" Binh asked an officer.

Le was an up-and-comer, acting desk sergeant for the shift.

"He went to the latrine, sir."

"Superintendent, I'm gonna water my dog."

Kiet and the officer exchanged shrugs. Binh came out of the latrine grimly, shaking his head. They walked into the parking lot and scanned the bicycles and motorscooters. Few Hickornians owned automobiles, and Kiet no longer budgeted for a staff car. Binh's appetite for velocity had been whetted hurtling along American freeways; he had totaled their last two vehicles.

Binh said, "Le owns a red Honda. I don't see it."

"Into the building," Kiet said. "Quickly."

He had spotted Le racing in their direction on Loubet. They watched from inside as he skidded to a halt and quickly dismounted. They went into Kiet's office and called for Corporal Le on the intercom.

Le reported at a position of attention. He was lean and intense and reminded Kiet of a slightly younger Binh. Le also reminded Binh of a slightly younger Binh. Perhaps, Kiet thought, the reason for the iron set of Binh's jaw, the whitening of his knuckles as they gripped his knees.

Kiet and Binh glared at Le until perspiration had beaded nicely on his forehead. Then Kiet said, "Corporal, you left your post."

"I had to go, superintendent. Officer Vuong took my place on the desk. He is highly capa—"

"Our facilities aren't good enough for you, Le?" Binh said. "You had to bop on up the road."

"Sir?" Le said incredulously.

"On your red Honda," Kiet said.

"Sir, am I being accused of something?"

"Should you be, corporal?"

"Sir, in all respect, please come to the point. I have to prepare my men for the raid."

"The raid is the point, bozo!"

"Again, am I being accused—"

"Should you be, corporal?"

Le folded his arms and shook his head. "This is insulting. I refuse to answer."

Binh shot out of his chair and yelled, "If you don't sing and sing fast, I'll haul your sorry ass up the yardarm and fire a twenty-one-gun salute where the sun don't shine!"

Le's arms fell limp at his sides. He gulped and said, "Superintendent, whatever he threatened to do to me, can he?" "Indeed."

"I suppose neither one of you has ever accepted a, um, gratuity?" Le said, simultaneously trembling and sneering.

Binh matched his sneer. "The word is bribe. Dirty money."

"Tell me you haven't, captain," Le said, showing teeth and tears.

"Ever hear of the Theory of Relativity?" Binh said, jabbing a finger. "It's not about atomic bombs, it's about lining your pockets, about going hog wild or playing it cool."

Kiet rose to his feet. "Gentlemen, be quiet and sit."

After they obeyed, he said, "Corporal, who?"

Le stared at his lap. "He started a conversation with me in a bar I stopped by one day. He bought the drinks, and we talked. He bought me more

drinks. One thing led to another. I have a sick mother and a younger sister still in school. He pays very well. Superintendent, when I went out, I called a phone number from a kiosk. I was immediately called back. That is our emergency communication. He said there was no bingo game tonight."

Le looked at Binh, then Kiet, and said, "I knew you had tricked me."

"Who is this man?"

"I honestly don't know. I met him at the bar only one other time. He looked and sounded different. I knew it was the same man after we began talking."

"Describe him as best you can, please."

"A stocky, middle-aged white man with a foreign accent."

"Aha," Binh cried. "An American. I knew it."

"All white men have foreign accents," Kiet said. "What are your long-term plans, you and this man?"

"He is in total control," Le said. "He notifies me. I know this, though. While he is occupying us on a tardy raid, there are other games in progress."

Binh cursed and slapped fist into hand. Le flinched. Kiet said, "Which bar, please?"

"That fancy new one on Avenue Che Guevara in the International District. I should never

have gone there, especially in uniform. It's so expensive, but I was curious."

Le's voice trailed off, and Binh asked, "The Red Star Sports Bar?"

"Yes, sir."

"Could your mystery man be a Russian?" Kiet asked.

Le shrugged. "All Caucasians look and sound alike."

"You getting thirsty, superintendent?" Binh said.

"Indeed."

"Go lock yourself in the holding tank and keep your yap shut, Le. The superintendent and I are gonna wet our whistles."

"Has to be Ivan and Sasha," Binh shouted. "Has to be."

Kiet was behind his young adjutant on a scooter, hanging on for dear life as Binh slalomed among pedicabs, wagons, jaywalkers, bicycles, and cars in the narrow streets of Hickorn.

"Indeed," Kiet yelled through a cyclone of a slipstream.

"I knew it, I just knew those two scuzzy Bolsheviks were at the bottom of the bingo situation."

But they are not Americans, Kiet declined to point out. Ivan and Sasha were KGB station agents assigned to the former Soviet Embassy. When the USSR crumbled, they found themselves jobless (downsized,

in Binh's vernacular), their hearts full of glasnost and their wallets empty.

On a moonless night Ivan and Sasha looted all the high technology they could carry—bugging devices, shotgun mikes, and various surveillance gear the Soviets had aimed at the United States Embassy and elsewhere—and went to the Embassy of the People's Republic of China, where they sold it for Swiss francs.

Ivan and Sasha had not been caught unawares by the political turmoil in Mother Russia. They had made preparations for new careers as running dog oppressors of the working class. According to Binh, they had researched American sociological documents such as *Sports Illustrated* and *Playboy* for lucrative Western recreational trends that would appeal to Luongan tastes. They are a pair of crafty Reds, Binh had said.

Indeed they were. They had decided to exploit a subspecies of consumer entitled "couch potato." This group comprised a large percentage of the American male population and was satiated by equal parts of televised sporting events and cold beer. Thus the francs were invested, and Hickorn's first sports bar was born. Further, the barmaids wore skimpy uniforms, and the mens' room had

condom machines in case the couch potatoes forgot their male imperatives.

The Red Star Sports Bar was an instant success. Kiet had meant to drop by anyway. Out of curiosity.

Binh throttled back. They were entering the International District, a residential enclave of sprawling villas composed of gingerbread stucco, red roof tile, and lush gardens. Western and Japanese entrepreneurs were neighbors with Hickory's wealthiest citizenry. Privacy was maintained by fences of imported stone, wrought iron, and topiary.

"Ever been to the Red Star, superintendent?"

"I never desired to."

"Me neither, but they say it swings. The hottest yuppie hangout in town. Ivan and Sasha are a pair of crafty Reds."

"If their establishment is so prosperous, why are they involved in illegal bingo?"

"That's what we hope to find out, superintendent. Here we are."

Binh pulled over at a U-shaped array of shops that Binh termed a strip mall. Fine jewelry. Exotic tropical flowers. Imported leather goods. European ladies' fashions. A parking lot sprinkled with Mercedes-Benz, BMW, Lexus. An architectural understatement of stucco, tile,

and draped bougainvillea grown from Latin American cuttings, the strip mall blended into the neighborhood. Tamarind trees in massive pots screened the Red Star's beer garden, the neon rainbow of signage in windows to its rear, and the rooftop satellite dishes that bristled like extraterrestrial mushrooms.

"Whaddaya think, superintendent?"

Kiet rubbed his numb posterior. "Impressive."

"For sure. Stateside, in retail, the way to make it is sports bars and outlet stores. That's the bottom line."

"If you say so, captain."

"Game plan, superintendent?"

"We go in for a friendly drink."

"Okay. Cool. Play it by ear. The ball's in their court, right?"

"Indeed."

They entered to a din of laughter, chatter and the chirping of cellular telephones. The majority of the clientele were young men with razor-cut hair and starched white shirts. Kiet was more accustomed to bars where patrons wore tattoos instead of pagers. The absence of cigarette smoke was a pleasant surprise, though subarctic air conditioning raised goosebumps on his arms.

They took a corner table beneath a plastic fern. At least six television screens were within view. Kiet saw Brazilian soccer,

English rugby, and an odd, violent match where fat men in gaily colored tights and helmets collided in quest of an ovoid ball.

"NFL," Binh explained. "New England versus New York. The Jets really suck, superintendent."

"If you say so."

A waitress with extraordinary cleavage for a Luongan arrived to take their order. Binh said he thought he was in love. She rolled her eyes and asked what they'd have. Kiet asked for a Golden Tiger. Binh rolled his eyes and hissed at him not to embarrass them, okay?

Golden Tiger, a smooth local brew with a touch of cloudiness, was inexplicably nicknamed "amber death" by nonaficionados. The waitress forced Kiet a smile and said that they didn't actually, you know, serve domestic beers. Binh ordered them each a pint of Weasel's Breath porter.

"Quit screwing up your face, superintendent. It's a micro. They're handcrafted by yuppies in three-car garages. The grosser the name, the tastier the suds."

The beer was chocolate colored with a creamy head, a remarkably flavorful brew. Kiet sipped, observing Ivan and Sasha behind their bar. Stout, perpetually grinning Slavs, they poured draft beer and rang their

cash registers nonstop. On the backbar, surrounded by caps and jerseys of assorted sporting franchises, was a circle of honor photographs of Stalin, Michael Jordan, Lenin, and Muhammad Ali. Old habits, Kiet thought.

"Prosperous," he said.

"Yeah, the Red Star's clientele has discretionary income that won't quit. That's what I don't get. This joint is a license to print money. Illegal bingo is big bucks, yeah, but why take the risk?"

"They have managed thus far to mitigate their risk."

"Good point, superintendent. For a couple of commie dorks who grew up on collective farms digging potatoes, they've come a long, long way."

"What do we have on them?"

"Zilch. Nothing to hang our hats on. Officially, they've kept their noses clean."

One of the Russian entrepreneurs sat down with them. "Hickory's leading law officers. Am honored. Feel safe."

"Which of the Bobbsey Twins are you, Ivan or Sasha?" Binh asked.

"Ivan, Sasha. Whichever. As you like." He tore up their bar check.

"We prefer to pay," Kiet said.

"But is happy hour," said the Russian.

"That means it's okay, super-

intendent," Binh said, signaling for another round.

"You are perhaps so adept at disguises you can be Ivan or you can be Sasha," Kiet said. "You could perhaps deceive one of your customers."

"Disguise was component of our profession. Old habit."

"You guys are incredible," said the virulently anti-communist Binh. "Things go sour and you discard Marxism like old shoes."

The Russian spread his hands. "You do what you must do, gentlemen. Your leader, the prince, has no army, no nukes, so he plays diplomacy gamesmanship, naming and renaming Hickory streets for glorious leaders in and out of power. He walks tightrope like Wallenda. Kiet, no glower at me. Am speaking in upmost admiration."

"Speak on the subject of bingo, please."

"Bingo?" the Russian said innocently. "Who is Bingo person?"

Binh laughed. "You're as full of guano as a Christmas goose."

"Bingo is a game of chance," Kiet said. "We are giving you the chance to speak honestly to us in a friendlier setting than my jail."

The Russian laughed. "So you are here on business. Am hurt. I thought you come for beer and sports. Replay of last night's

Monday Night Football is on soon."

"Who's playing?" Binh asked.

"Captain," Kiet said.

"Packers and Forty-Niners," said the Russian.

"Superintendent, this is a key matchup—"

"But you are not involved in bingo?"

"Nyet. I think someday I like to try bingo, but they go out of business. Too bad."

"There's always the floating game," Binh said.

"Is illegal."

Binh looked at Kiet, shaking his head. "This guy's priceless."

"You do not approve of illegal bingo?" Kiet said. "Commendable."

"Do approve," the Russian said. "Marx said religion is opium of masses. Could be that bingo is opium of Luongan masses?"

"You oversimplify," Kiet said.

"Why, tell me, is underground bingo only secret Luongans have ever been able to keep?"

Neither Kiet or Binh had an answer.

"I tell you why. Bingo with high prizes is hope." He stood. "Happy hunting, gentlemen."

The buxom waitress arrived with their beers.

"Thanks for small favors," Binh said, lifting his glass in toast. "And don't get careless."

The Russian grinned. "No.

thank me for second beer. Happy hour is done."

At headquarters Binh said, "What do we do with Corporal Le?"

"I doubt we can use him as a double agent. The Russians are too smart for that."

"True. I'll let him cool his heels for a day or two, then demote him to patrol officer. But we're still at square one on the Russkis and their bingo. They know we know and that we can't do a damn thing about it."

"Captain, remember what the Russian said? Bingo with high prizes is hope?"

"Sure."

"And do you also remember the winning wagering sheet abandoned in haste at the warehouse?"

"Yep."

"Do you think the Russians feel an obligation to pay him or her later if she does not have it as proof?"

"I'd love to ask him or her, superintendent."

"Perhaps he or she can ask us?"

"Dream on. How?"

"What is the city's most popular newspaper, captain?"

"Easy question. That sleazy tabloid, the Hickorn *Enquiring Mind*."

"Besides its lurid headlines, does the *Mind* also not have a

personal classified section where, among other things, members of the opposite sex advertise for partners, their intentions honorable and dishonorable, with emphasis on the latter?"

Binh blushed. "Well, I'm not real familiar with that trashy rag, but I'm catching your drift."

The ad ran in the following morning's edition. It requested cryptically that "the unrequited winner of the night before last appear at high noon at Savhana Park by the statue, prepared to prove their loss. Correspondent will be holding copy of this edition."

The statue was oxidized bronze and pigeon-specked. Prince Savhana, Luong's greatest hero, was atop a rearing stallion, sword poised overhead, presumably to decapitate an enemy infantryman. The invaders were Chinese, and the statue commemorated Luong's last military victory. The year was 154 B.C.

Binh, in civvies, stood by the statue as casually as possible. Kiet sat on a bench an inconspicuous twenty meters away. Even from that distance he could read the headlines on today's *Mind*: WORLD'S FATTEST WOMAN DEVOURS OWN WEDDING CAKE. ELVIS DONATES KIDNEY,

SAYS RECIPIENT—HOSPITAL AT LOSS TO EXPLAIN NOCTURNAL TRANSPLANT.

At noon exactly, a tiny, elderly woman in black pajamas with a cigarette dangling from her mouth approached Binh. Their plan, which Binh termed a "sting operation," was for the applicant to describe the array of inked dots on the gaming sheet. Binh had the sheet in his pocket. Once the winning array was verified, he was to scribble his approval on the sheet, give it to her, and instruct her to present it for payment at the next bingo match she attended. And, oh, which night and at which location, please? We need to be certain that adequate funds will be on hand.

Almost immediately things went wrong. She began yelling, the cigarette gyrating in her mouth. Binh shook his head, waving his arms, chattering at high speed. She snatched the gaming sheet out of his hand and turned tail. Binh yelled and pursued.

They were coming in Kiet's direction. He rose and stepped into her path. She crashed into him, rocking him on his heels, surprisingly solid for her size and age.

Kiet held her by the forearms. "Madam, stop thrashing or we shall resort to handcuffs. Captain, what is going on?"

"She came unglued when I wouldn't pay off on the spot. She made me as a policeman and ran for it."

"You smell like police," she rasped at Binh. "I sell produce at the Central Market. You police, always coming to my stand, mooching a piece of fruit."

She flicked her cigarette on the grass. "I don't tell you nothing."

"She became abusive, superintendent. I placed her under arrest and had started reading her her rights when she bugged out."

The old woman had a face of leather and teeth blackened from a lifetime of chewing betel nut. She lighted another cigarette and said, "I have the right to remain silent."

Kiet groaned. Binh and his District of Columbia Miranda card. "Madam, you do *not* have the right to remain silent. Talk to me or you go to jail. What, please, is your name?"

She softened. "Mai Trung."

"Is this your gaming sheet?"

"I'd know it anywhere. The prize was twenty thousand zin."

"Twenty thou Luongan zin is twenty-five bucks U.S., superintendent. Not too shabby."

"One month's income at my stall," Mai said, sniffing. "I was counting on the money. I screamed, 'Bingo,' and he

screamed, 'Raid.' Everybody ran."

"He?" Kiet said.

Mai Trung didn't answer.

"Come to the bench with me, please," Kiet said, taking her arm. "We shall talk."

"Headquarters, superintendent, is my recommendation to loosen her tongue. Our interrogation room. The bare one-thousand watt bulb. Dig the ambience."

Kiet and the old woman ignored Binh and sat down on the bench. Binh stood by, pouting.

"He was a Russian, yes?"

Mai nodded, eyes downcast.

"Are you the only person who lost a prize because of ill timing?"

She looked at him. "No. You have had other raids. Three?"

"Twice," Binh said sourly.

"Both times people have lost prizes, larger prizes than mine. You ask them to pay, they say they can do nothing. There are no records, and it is the police's fault, not theirs."

"They being Russians?"

Mai Trung spat. "They are white men. Who can say where they were hatched."

"One or two men changing their appearances perhaps?"

"Perhaps," Mai said. "But that does not explain the Luongan callers."

"Luongans?"

"Yes. On any given night

there are six or seven games scattered around Hickorn. But you are the police. You know that."

Kiet suppressed a groan and looked at Binh, who gulped. A vice grown to this proportion would be nearly impossible to squash.

"Madam, with so many game locations, how can schedule information be secretly passed?"

"Announcements at the games. Word of mouth."

"Madam, we are Luongans. How can the secrets be kept?"

Mai Trung looked at Kiet as if he were a child. "Hope. Do you realize all the different ways to win?"

"Not merely a straight line?"

"You have Four Corners," she said. "You have Pick 8. You have Pyramids. You have Boxes. They all pay better than five in a row."

"Which pays best?"

"Blackout. Fill each of the twenty-five numbers and you win half a million zin. When you raided at the airport, a friend of mine was four spaces from Blackout." She lighted another cigarette. "You bastards."

Binh whistled. "Half a mil. That's six hundred clams and change. A small fortune."

Kiet had an idea. "Madam Mai, do you have your ink stamp with you?"

She took it from a pocket. "I'm

never without my lucky dauber."

"They owe you your prize, and they owe you for your inconvenience," Kiet said. "Do as I tell you, and tonight we shall play bingo."

"Why should I?"

"Because your luck will improve."

Rickshaw Pagoda Garden sported neither a rickshaw nor a garden. Pagodalike spires and curves were also absent. Located on Richard Nixon Boulevard, the airport highway, Rickshaw Pagoda Garden was Hickorn's largest Chinese restaurant. An unornamented box of wood and glass, it was designed for economy and capacity.

The rear portion of the restaurant was a banquet room. At the back door Binh unsnapped his holster. "Every town in the world has a Chinese restaurant, superintendent. That's a known fact."

"Captain, the doorknob first, please," Kiet said.

"Out of my way," said Mai Trung. "They will be finished for the night before you idiots move."

The policemen followed her into a room packed with primarily cigarette-smoking, middle-aged women. Multiple gaming sheets spread before them, some

played with daubers in each hand. On a low platform next to a squirrel cage full of numbered ping-pong balls was a mustachioed Russian, Ivan or Sasha.

"Police! Freeze!"

The players collectively gasped. Kiet said, "Captain, please put away the gun."

"This is an outrage," the Russian shouted. "You shoot somebody for victimless crime, I have you fired."

Binh twirled his weapon and reholstered. "Okay, fine, but let's see what's behind that soup-strainer."

Binh pulled off the Russian's fake mustache.

"Ow! Glue sticks me. Police brutalizing."

"Knock it off, you sissy, Ivan or Sasha or whoever you are. Let's talk bingo."

The Russian touched his raw upper lip with a finger and gestured to the crowd. "You shut me down, you be sorry. You kill their dream, you have civil disorder. Russians know all about civil disorder."

"We are not closing down your game," Kiet said, placing a hand on Mai's shoulder. "I am answering a fraud complaint."

Binh held up the blacked-out bingo sheet. "Read it and weep, bozo."

"Your manipulation of the raids served two purposes," Kiet said. "You controlled our activi-

ty, and you timed your evacuation when players were close to winning prizes. You had a few minutes' leeway, which you used to financial advantage."

"Cannot prove. Woman is cheat. No blackout."

"What did you call me, fatso?"

Kiet restrained Mai and told the backpedaling Russian, "You force me to arrest you for fraud."

"My word against hers. My bingo illegal. No such thing as fraud when you play illegal. Is double negative."

"No way, Jose," Binh said. "Two wrongs do make a right. That's a known fact. Pay the lady."

Kiet gestured to the crowd. "Your reluctance to do right—what effect, I wonder, has it on your paying customers."

The effect was a homicidal murmur.

The Russian paid.

In the following days, numerous citizens came forward with complaints similar to Mai Trung's. With Kiet's blessing, Captain Binh appointed himself commander of the Bingo Fairness Task Force. Since ex-Corporal Le was familiar with the bingo venues, Binh appointed him Raiding Team Leader. The Hickorn police department made no effort to establish the veracity of individual claimants.

The Russians paid and paid and paid.

Illegal bingo collapsed under the weight of its overhead. By conservative estimate, payoffs to fraudulent claimants exceeded by a factor of three monies previously paid in bribes and taxes by legal gamesters. Shortly thereafter the Hickorn Red Star Sports Bar was padlocked by creditors. The Swiss francs from the Chinese had provided for a deposit on the building and down payments on furnishings and supplies, but the fledgling capitalists had immediately overextended themselves. Thus the bingo action.

Ivan and Sasha vanished. Word had it that they returned to Moscow to explore employment opportunities in the Russian Mafia.

Meanwhile, legal bingo resprouted and flourished.

Kiet was reflecting on these recent events when he heard the dreaded cry, "Bingo!"

He flinched, threw down his dauber in disgust, and said, "One number from a winner. How difficult could I-36 be? How did that person have a bingo so fast? How?"

"Relax and be patient, superintendent," said Binh. "Look how close I was to a Chevron. And the game before that, Four Corners. Bingo's like poker.

Sooner or later your cards will come."

They were in the nonsmoking section, a tiny far corner of the room where they had to cup their ears to hear the calls. Kiet said, "If you say so."

Three hours and ten games later, the bingo caller said that was it for the evening, thank you very much, and hope to see everyone again tomorrow.

"Not likely," Binh muttered, getting up. "I was one number from a Starburst on the next to last game, remember?"

"Yes," Kiet said, though he hadn't. Earlier, *he* had been one number from an Inside Layer Cake winner.

The caller was at the exit, saying goodbye to the players. Mai Trung had bought a gaming license and a rental deposit for Rickshaw Pagoda Garden with her Blackout payoff.

"Better luck next time, boys," she said, grinning a black-toothed grin.

Wordlessly Kiet and Binh trudged by her into the night air.

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A Lacking for Salt



May 27, Horatio Hotel, South London, tea.

Stopped in for tea sandwiches; stale.

Can't be bothered by that because far worse bother ahead. Trip to America, hope to delay several months. Worse bother,

and reason for trip: letter from American lawyer today who is executor under Harry's will.

Odd that my oddball brother didn't choose one of his own sons to manage his estate but, lawyer says, Harry hadn't heard from either in years.

Other significant fact: brother's estate exceeds four million, big surprise. I, sister of the deceased, to be endowed with \$3,000 per month for life. (How generous, Harry, seeing I'm already 73. But as I really don't deserve your money am quite touched.)

Bothered that brother appointed executor Smedley. Expect lawyer will take big commission from estate. Called the man today, informed him I will keep sharp eye on fee. Attorney will charge by the hour for work performed instead of taking flat percentage of estate as executor's commission; Harry worked that out. But leave it to brainy attorney to rack up big bill filling out forms, signing checks, transferring Harry's bank accounts to estate, all of which Smedley says must be done.

Don't want to leave shop untended, as Pampered Palate will launch new product, "Dutch" pancakes Thursday. (Pancake supplier really in South London, will keep secret.) Hope to make killing from London food faddies. Thinking of asking recent acquaintance, Bollo (Rumford), to watch shop till I get back. Retired diplomat, Queen's College Oxford, vigorous 79, frequently in shop, asked me to dinner at his flat. (Tonight.) Wear something skimpy?

August 26, Claridge's, tea.

Bothered and busy. Still in London; leave tomorrow for Massachusetts, U.S.A. Haven't been home in decades (hate U.S. tea). Am thinking of giving up life here forever: aged friends dropping like flies. Funerals recent months of Betty, Emma, Shirley, Charlotte. Problem is, no companions in States. Lawyer says not necessary I come, Harry's estate fine, but I feel need to check up.

Worried about leaving Pampered Palate. Business is booming, shop assistant Georgina an airheaded ninny. What if she sells stale stock? New pancakes sold out, *Tit for Tat* runs drooling writeup from food critic, news spot: "Dutch Delight."

Dinner last night with Bollo cut short when he choked on avocado. Had to administer Heimlich Maneuver. Glad I wasn't wearing skimpy thing which he never notices anyway. Says he hates avocado.

December 22, Ritz Boston, tea.

Commonwealth beloved by Harry designed for ducks, not humans. In all my 51 years in U.K. it never rained like this. Have taken apartment in spiffy Boston hotel. Harry's gracious annuity to pay.

Harry's will probated some time ago. Nonspeaking sons apparently roused by odor of mon-

ey: both signed probate petition at lawyer's request. All done by mail, says super-efficient executor Smedley. Fussy paperwork remains, however, for Harry's bank accounts, mutual funds, platinum investments.

Smedley longwinded, speaks legal Greek, e.g., "1041," "706," "QTIP trust." Fancy office, Boston Harbor view. Marble lobby holds giant sculpture, looks like ladies' pocketbook, shines like gold, probably plywood, no doubt costing lawyers' clients extra \$100 per visit.

Drove to town where Harry lived (Ashland). Toured house of deceased: brother definitely off rocker. In pajama drawer, found \$644,722 cash in teapot. Knew something fishy when I saw it because Harry hated tea. Took money to bank. Manager (broomstick woman in expensive suit) sniffs, "Where did you get *that*?"

Told her I stole it and deposited it in the estate account.

Small town, embarrassing, people will talk. Harry unstable after wife died, known fact, says bank manager (Nancy) at cosy restaurant lunch. Says she knew Harry four decades. Son George convicted of bank funds mix-up in youth, embezzlement rumors hushed up, didn't I know? Told her Harry hadn't written me in years, I never met sons. Over third vermouthe Nan-

cy hinted that Walter, other son, turned George in; also, Walter fled to Europe to escape dysfunctional family.

Told Nancy she reads too many books. Also told her bank must cut charges for estate account. Told her Tiny Tots Orphanage gets part of residue; bank fees will come out of children's suppers. On fourth vermouth she agreed.

Am curious to meet sons who will be collecting checks: \$300,000 for George; residue (big whopper) goes one-half to Tiny Tots, one-half to Walter. (Needs help. Major life mess-up, hints Smedley. Abandoned by wife, lives in Basel, has baby.) Neither son answers phone. Harry, you left a mess.

Suspect sons' problems caused by mother's high-class delusions. New York socialite named Ernestine, thought was Consuela Vanderbilt. Misfit in backwoods Massachusetts. Held charity ball, no debutantes came, loony bin next stop. Refused to let Harry or family see me after my famous comment at wedding regarding stale cake. (This excuse invented. Woman was pathologically jealous. Besides, cake *was* stale.)

Telephoned Pampered Palate, Georgina says all well. "Dutch" pancakes booming, *Times* of London there for photo. Told her to shut up about South Lon-

don pancake supplier. Bollo has been in asking for me, got Ritz address and phone.

Executor Smedley an overpriced specimen, charges \$310 per hour; calculates it per each six minutes. Offered to help with Harry's estate to keep down Smedley fee, which at end of estate comes out of shares for Tiny Tots and Walter.

Smedley exceedingly verbal. Got onto subject of "ademption of legacy," curious case of *Cartfield v. Carter* 1896. Told him legal chat dispensable and left.

April 10, Crowded Cranny, Harvard Square, tea.

Cranny indeed but acceptable Stateside version of Pampered P.

Well, well. Yesterday got phone call from lawyer (Smedley).

He: "Come to my office."

Me: "How much will it cost?"

He: "I won't charge you."

Me: "Then why make the invitation? Anyway I'm going out to tea."

Smedley: "We'll make you tea. George is here."

Went to Smedley's law firm. Declined tea. (At \$310 per hour, how much per cup?) Mahogany walls on elevator, decorator flecks in carpet, rug-and-feathers art in hallway, oil scenes of Boston ships. Lawyers thrive, we pay. Smedley seated in decorator conference room. Teak

table with zebrawood pinstripes, top honcho leather chairs. (How much does Tiny Tots pay for that?)

Recognized George immediately: looks just like his father. Surprised to see child spinning in next oversized leather chair. Warm welcome from George, handshake, etc.

Smedley: "There's a complication; George didn't tell us he has a son."

Me: "How does that complicate things?"

"Well, not terribly," Smedley said, "there being no direct bequest to the grandchild, *Huron v. McGregor* 1902, but my letter to you in January did specifically ask, Mr. Millstrom, that you mention any children."

"I guess I overlooked that," said George, snapping a suspender (frog pattern). Slick dresser, corporate style (working in a bank again?). Looks too young to be a father. (Definitely not ready for it. Visibly awkward with child, named Rufus. Mother left him a month ago, Smedley explained later. Poor kid.)

"What a coincidence," I said to Smedley, "that he should have the same name as Walter's son."

Could have kicked myself. Answer to non-legal question cost estate two minutes at \$310 per hour. "Not really," Smedley replies. "*Prescott v. Willigant*

1911: 'a coincidence of name is a not uncommon coincidence.' Rufus was your grandfather's middle name. Walter's son is Theodore Rufus Millstrom, and George's boy here is Rufus David Millstrom. Since the court has already granted probate, we won't amend the petition, but next time, Mr. Millstrom, please be more attentive."

George here to get advance on \$300,000, Smedley comments, handing him envelope with check.

Thanked George for letting me meet him. Long-lost aunt, etc., jolly discussion.

Rufus watches everything.

Smedley (to George): "Any news from Walter?"

(Surprised Smedley would mention Walter, who gets so much more of estate.

(Does George know?)

(Neither son at father's funeral, bank manager Nancy says.)

George (stiffly): "I haven't talked to my brother in years."

"We sent Walter an advance on his bequest, which he received," Smedley went on (\$5.16 per minute, have just figured it out), "but get no answer at his phone in Switzerland."

Shrug from George: "I guess he's quite a recluse." Left with child soon after. Rufus seems uncomfortable. George lacks the feminine touch.

Have a mind to call ex-wife

and tell her off. George in Boston for week. Offered to take Rufus to Public Garden tomorrow afternoon. Surprised when George said yes.

Don't care much for children, but this one is my grand-nephew after all.

April 11, Ritz. Tea and chocolate milk.

Charming afternoon with Rufus at Public Garden. Bought peanuts to feed ducks; Rufus ate most. Child afraid of water. Perfectly hysterical when taken to edge of lake to see swan boats. Will tell George to consider swim lessons or some such thing. (How does he manage a bath?)

Child has circles under the eyes. Learning first words, George boasts proudly when dropped Rufus off at hotel. About time for child over two years, but departure of mother may explain tardy talk. Rufus says "ack-quak" to ducks, pigeons, swans. Says "otterwuh" to water. "Owerfl" to flowers in Garden. Sat till six P.M. in Ritz lobby waiting for George, who was late. Took Rufus to bar, ordered peanut butter sandwich, arrived on doily with frizzy cello toothpicks. Says "oo-pith." Told George ten P.M. too late to pick up tiny tot.

Exhausted diaper supply, requested Ritz concierge order out

for same. Delivered to us in lobby by bowing doorman in swallow-tailed coat. Not pleased to learn Pampers is U.S. brand name for diapers: prefer that word applied strictly to food-stuffs à la P.P.

Feel sorry for Rufus. Seems obvious child would prefer mother. Goes willingly to father, but affection seems lacking. Most men inept at this sort of stuff. Taking Rufus to Charles River tomorrow. George relieved; says has business discussions, says difficult to bring two-year-old on business trip.

April 12, Ritz.

George late again. River bad choice for outing. Forgot child's fear of water. Spring day, diverted course to riverside park, met nannies. One of them English, said she knows P. Palate. Said flatmate wrote her about "Dutch" pancakes. Prefers American doughnuts. Offered Rufus one. Child learned word for doughnut, "owe-nutdd."

Telegram from Bollo: arriving Ritz this week. Seeking amity, friendship, etc.

What etc.?

April 15, Ritz, tea.

Bollo here in room on fourth floor. I in room on sixth, Rufus with me for the night in crib wheeled in by Ritz bellboy. (Where was George?) Three

days of visit with Rufus, Bollo. Took them to movie, Bollo stubbed toe in dark, limped to lobby for ice, much shuffling in seat taking off shoe, could barely hear. Bollo and Rufus get along.

Called lawyer to say I think it strange George spends so little time with son. Smedley says "some men more suited to children than others." Told him not to charge estate \$5.16 per minute for that statement, which does not constitute legal work. Loud cough from Smedley. Will it cost me fifty cents? Hung up fast.

April 16, Ritz, tea.

Rufus and George gone back to California. Hate to admit it, but miss the boy. Took Rufus and Bollo to Crowded Cranny yesterday, Bollo very opinionated. Told me I should convert Pampered Palate to Dutch Pancake Emporium, I say no. Bollo keen to put up £30,000. I think it's an excuse to get me back to London.

Told him am not going back to London for foreseeable future, Bollo looked wounded.

He: "You mean you like it here?"

Me: "Not exactly."

He (cough): "Is it the child?"

"The child," I said, "is in California, so what's he got to do with it?"

Bollo leaving tomorrow, announces has booked room at Ritz for December.

September 20, Crowded Cranny, Cambridge.

Conference with Smedley. Meeting lasted one hour twenty-eight minutes exactly: \$454 down the drain.

Told him not to charge estate \$15.48 for three minutes wasted when expensive fountain pen leaked in his lap. Lawyer can use a Bic like everyone else. Orphans not to go hungry.

Smedley says settlement of estate going smoothly. Death tax returns approved by IRS and Massachusetts tax authorities; tax paid, governments satisfied. Bequests under Harry's will to gardener, librarian, lady friend, all paid. Trust set up at bank for my monthly annuity; remainder goes to Tiny Tots when I die. Nothing left for estate to do now except pay Smedley's legal fee, pay rest of George's \$300,000, pay multimillion residue to Walter and Tiny Tots. Next step: have everyone sign "accounting," document listing each penny that came into estate and went out, exonerating Smedley from liability as exec; Smedley will prepare.

Asked Smedley if boys not upset that so much goes to Walter and so little to George. Estate has \$2,410,000 residue (left

over), meaning about \$1.2 million to Walter and Orphans each, compared to \$300,000 to George.

"George never complains, nor do I ask him, *Peanockle v. Hootwright* 1927," says Smedley. "As Walter does not answer his phone but has receipted for all his payments sent by mail, I assume he is happy with the arrangement and seeks only his rightful privacy as beneficiary, *Livingstone v. Trustee*, 1935."

Asked Smedley what those payments were.

Showed me letters from Walter asking for \$40,000, \$250,000, \$300,000. Asked Smedley whether residuary bequest generally paid out so much so fast. Shrug from expensive lawyer.

Told him not to charge orphans \$2 for that gesture or I would hit him on head with *Ladies' Legal Encyclopedia*, which now resides in my handbag. Smedley agreed. Left meeting fast.

October 15, Crowded Cranny.

Bollo here a few months early.

Went to Ritz tea, Bollo got embarrassing hiccups. Tuxedoed maitre d' brought paper bag, said, "breathe in, hiccups will abate." Did not work. Bollo tried drinking out of wrong side of teacup, splattered sofa. Prop-

er Bostonians seated opposite, not amused.

I roared at Bollo, treatment successful.

Bollo says I should go back to London. Told him don't want to, have arthritic toe. Bollo says rain is worse in U.S. Asked if I've heard from Rufus. Told him no but also told him George is coming next month to meet with Smedley, sign "accounts." May see Rufus then.

November 16, Boston Harbor Hotel.

Bollo quite a detective. Am fuming and flabbergasted. Was brought here to tea by glowing Bollo, shown menu, nearly fainted to see offering for tea, "Dutch pancakes."

Ordered plate (\$7). The product itself. South London supplier thriving off my publicity. Menu description says, "The new food fad in London."

Bollo says now that estate is wrapped up, I should open branch of Pampered Palate in Harvard Square, sell pancakes. Have mind to do so.

Annoyed that I didn't get exclusive from supplier. Told waitress pancakes stale, sent back (they weren't). Waitress apologetic, offered \$7 cake slice instead. Sorry I sent back pancakes because cake was stale.

December 1, Ritz, evening. Tea and chocolate milk.

Rufus here! Has grown inches. Steady walker.

George here five days, signing papers with Smedley. Asked him if I could keep Rufus at Ritz suite, George relieved, has business.

Took Rufus and Bollo to zoo, exhausting. Bollo lost hat in rhino pen, had to get keeper to extract it. Seems Rufus has never seen a giraffe, now says "ri-jaffes." Says, "I like." Likes elephants, rhinos, donkeys. Took both to Aquarium. Rufus likes eels, sharks, turtles. Bollo fed doughnut to seal, stern lecture from furious attendant. Seal happy. Took both bowling. Bollo gets hiccups, perfect score.

December 6, evening tea (again).

No George last night to pick up Rufus. Called Smedley. Secretary to Smedley says Smedley gone to lawyers' boondoggle in Hawaii, left this morning, secretary no idea where or who George is.

Rufus undisturbed.

Asked him over chocolate milk, "Where's your daddy?"

Burst into tears.

Bollo says, "There there, your father's just tied up in a business meeting somewhere."

"Favver in meeting," Rufus

agrees.

December 7, Ritz (Bollo's suite).

Tried to call Smedley re absent George at Bar Association Fest in Hawaii. No luck. Lawyers out snorkeling.

Called Smedley's secretary, asked if news from George. No news.

Called bank manager (Nancy). No gossip on George; was astonished to hear George in town.

If George not here by tomorrow, will call police to report missing parent.

December 9, Joe's Donuts.

Took cab, ended up here.

Sign says, "Best coffee in the U.S."

Need time to think.

Rufus and Bollo choosing doughnuts. Told them to get me a clunker.

Earlier today took Rufus and Bollo to visit Harvard Yard, stopped at Crowded Cranny, where surprising comment made by Rufus.

Holiday stock in shop, Christmas cookies from all lands.

Told Rufus he could choose one. Showed him gingerbread men, red and green Santas, children's et cetera.

Child not interested in gingerbread man, Santa.

Instead reaches for cello bag with Xmas bells decor, containing round hard white cookies (plain, sugar-coated), says, as if

to old friend, "*pfeffernuesse*."

Wanted nothing else. Said, "Me love, me want." Stamped feet excitedly while I paid cashier.

Stared at the boy curiously. Perfectly pronounced a word which is not English.

Asked Bollo: "Is this one of the new words you've been teaching him?"

Bollo said no. Looks at Rufus, looks at cookie bag, asks, "Aren't those German import cookies sold at Pampered P.?"

Told Bollo this was true.

"I don't remember him asking for them before," said Bollo.

Ditto for me.

"But," goes on Bollo, "they only come into the shops at Christmastime."

Told Bollo if he wasn't so smart he'd be stupid.

"Then why," said Bollo, "did he know the word?"

Told Bollo to sit down and eat his doughnut.

"Reminds me," Bollo went on, "of that famous scholar, so-and-so, who having never spoken at five years, at dinner one night suddenly said, 'Madam, please pass the salt.' When asked why he hadn't spoken before, he explained, 'I never before lacked for salt.'"

Told Bollo I got the point.

Told Rufus I didn't know he liked, or lacked, *pfeffernuesse*.

Rufus said he did.

Asked when he'd had them before.

Surprised at his reply.

Couldn't think straight.

Told Bollo I needed a cup of plain American coffee. Crowded Cranny too crowded to think.

Took Rufus, Bollo, bag of pfeffs, came here.

Waiting for cup of Joe's plain coffee.

Have cash in purse, which I got from bank to pay Ritz bill. Am deciding what to do with it.

December 10, American Airlines.

Rufus asleep. Bollo snoring. Couldn't get Smedley by phone. Conference office says attorney clan gone out to cross-examine volcano.

Hope they all blow up.

No George.

Have taken matters into own hands: Went to Smedley's office to check something. Took Rufus and Bollo along. Insisted to secretary that I had to see some of Harry's items, stored in falling-apart cardboard box inside Smedley's teak and chrome office.

Pocketed some materials from Harry's personal effects, will replace at appropriate time.

Hope will be useful.

Idea forming in head.

Heading home to Pampered P., one stopover first.

Hope not to be charged with

abducting child. Told Logan Airport ticket check that grandchild passport deep in dirty diaper bag, Bollo faints at smell, lady says go ahead. May face trouble when land.

Bollo's nose in bandage. Tripped when boarding plane. Was carrying lobster bag, dropped it, six lobsters escaped, plane held up one hour. Stewardess not amused. Ice bag on Bollo's nose.

Told him he should be able to manage lobster if I, 73-year-old lady, can get on board with toddler on hip.

Disgusted to see "Dutch" pancakes for sale at airport: cheap inferior brand made in Delaware.

December 11, British Embassy, Geneva.

Matters under discussion.

We three brought here due to Rufus passport problem. Former diplomat, Bollo fast-talked to Swiss when lack of Rufus passport discovered. Bollo called U.K. embassy colleagues, who retrieved us.

FBI might get involved. "Missing parent" problem.

December 12, embassy cafeteria.

Bollo drinking tea. Rufus playing under tables.

Phone call to Walter at residence, no answer.

Phone call to Smedley, urgent, Hawaii. Left message at lawyer center: Smedley to get to phone, snorkel suit or no.

Smedley in big trouble as I see it.

Called Scotland Yard. Said can do nothing. Called FBI, said their jurisdiction limited, I should act locally.

British Embassy has called local police.

Everyone calls Walter, no answer.

Xmas season. *Pfeffs* for sale in shops; I distract Rufus.

December 14, Basel police.

Officer assigned is Hesse, young man who spent school year in Idaho. English adequate but not complete. Familiar with Emmmenthaler, rustic area where German dialect spoken; drove us there to town where Walter lives.

Passed dogcart carrying milk-can. Rufus says, "Og-car!" Bollo and I exchange a glance. He knows this, too?

No Walter. House empty.

Found way in. Rufus very excited.

Sickening feeling. Seems that child knows house.

To what extent?

Same degree of familiarity as a dog? Who knows what young child is conscious of.

Did George bring him here on visit?

Cried inconsolably in bedroom. Said, *Daddy*, etc.

House has not been lived in for months. Cobwebs, dust everywhere.

Hesse long talk with neighbor, neighbor points at Rufus, Hesse comes back shaking head.

Neighbor says Walter Millstrom died in a boating accident months ago, the wife, too. Child saw all from shore, playing with neighbor for afternoon. Asks if I am the grandmother.

Gave Hesse photo taken from Harry's stuff in Smedley's office.

"This is the boy's father?" Hesse asks me, pointing to the photo.

Told him yes and no.

Showed him two photos, first photo George, second Walter, explained Hesse should ascertain from neighbor which photo is missing Rufus parent. Further to ascertain whether man in Walter photo is man who died in boat accident.

Further should ask if man in George photo was here around time of accident.

Answers: Walter photo is Rufus parent and man who died, George here at time of accident; was in boat, too; miraculously survived.

Neighbor pointed to Rufus, shook head, said bereaved brother of victim took boy home to U.S., no other living rela-

tives. Says George here a few times to check house and mail, says house will be sold.

Back to Embassy.

Rufus needs motherly attentions. Silent in car.

Embassy says FBI flew to Hawaii lawyers' barbecue, took Smedley from hot-dog fry for questioning re payments to dead Walter.

Called Smedley myself. Lawyer claims not his fault, had no indication Walter not alive, says Walter signed all receipts for money.

Told him should have checked signatures on Walter's money requests against signature of living Walter on probate petition before unfortunate accident. Later signatures were by George.

FBI trying to locate latter.

British Embassy has convinced Swiss to issue emergency passport for Rufus.

December 17, Claridge's, London.

Best tea in the world.

Rufus thinks so, too.

Staying in London for good. Fired Georgina from Pampered Palate, was selling stale pancakes, hired Bollo instead. Called South London supplier, tripled order, got exclusive on new item.

Smedley in hot water. Told him has to waive lawyer's fee to estate, which Orphanage and Walter would otherwise pay. Bigger problem of Smedley is funds he has to scrape up equal to what he paid "Walter" if George doesn't pay it back.

Repayment by George doubtful, since George still missing.

Told Smedley he'd better start selling teak table and marble floor tiles, *Willicott v. Beneficiary*, 1897.

With Walter dead, Walter's \$1.2 million goes to Rufus.

Will fight for that till I'm 97.

Terrible boat accident being reinvestigated. Hard to know truth if George doesn't show up.

Smedley pushing U.S. adoption papers fast, no charge.

Rufus to stay here with Bollo and me. Adores Bollo, pancakes, Claridge's.

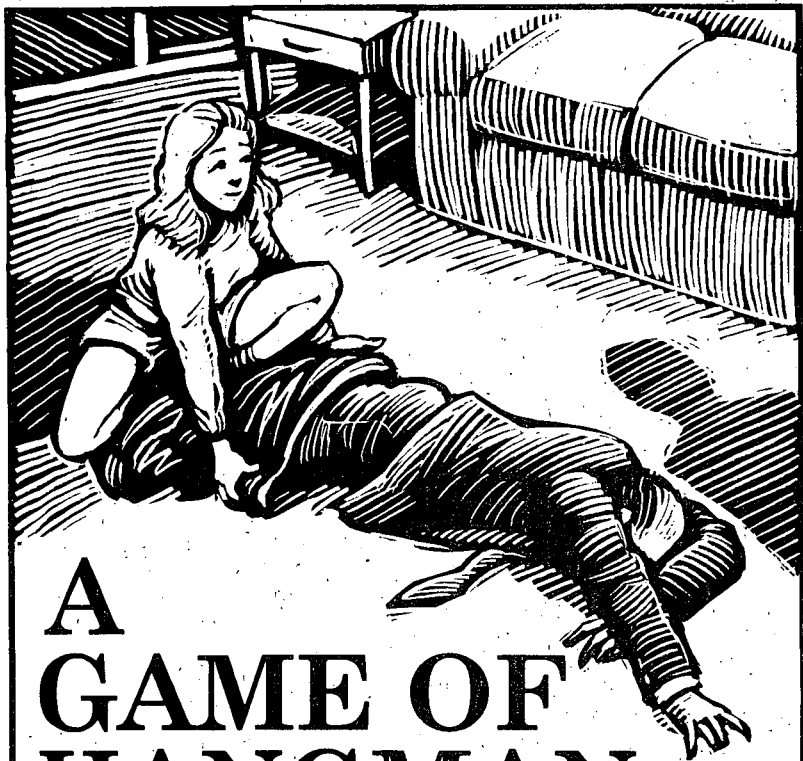
Adoption officer requires stable household, so Bollo and I tied knot this morning.

Three days' honeymoon at Claridge's.

Unfortunate letter to Bollo today saying his half-brother died, big shame.

Half-brother appointed Bollo to be his executor. Smoots, solicitor for estate, on fancy stationery says he will handle all.

Beware, Smoots.



A GAME OF HANGMAN

Ron Goulart

When he walked into his small living room out of the windy, rain-swept Southern California night, he noticed a middle-sized, well-dressed dead man sprawled face down on his threadbare rug.

Wes Goodhill also noticed Casey McLeod. She was crouched on the carpet wearing lemon yellow shorts and a grey sweatshirt, in the process of trying to pull a large, wrinkled, black plastic garbage bag

up over the corpse's feet.

"Don't get angry, Wes," said the pretty blonde, standing up and giving him a very tentative smile.

"I'll remain calm, Casey," he assured her. "But could you possibly explain what in the bloody hell is going on?"

She cleared her throat. She bent and tugged at the back of her white running shoe. "What do you know about South American politics?"

"Not much at all, but what does—"

"I'm wondering if it might be dangerous—for you, I mean—if I tell you too much."

"Don't tell me too much, Casey." Wes nodded at the body. "But could you, at the very least, tell me who this guy is and why he happens to be dead in my living room?" he inquired. "Oh, and you might fill me in on where you've been for the past eleven months. And, if there's time before I toss you and your cadaver out into the night, mention how your trip to Europe went."

The rain was hitting harder, the wind slammed at the beachside cottage.

She looked away. "I didn't actually go to Europe, Wes."

"Oh so?" He took a few more steps into the room and seated himself on the sofa, looking at the young woman and not the body. "When you hightailed it

out of here with the loot you made from selling those Will Destry animation cels, your hastily scrawled farewell note informed me that you were overcome with a burning desire to see Europe at once—and alone."

"I can see how that might have hurt you," she said. "But when the old wanderlust hits me, Wes, I don't always think too rationally and—"

"Skip that. Explain this body."

"Well, it all ties in with what I actually did." Skirting the sprawled body, Casey came over and sat near him on his sofa. "Now, don't howl and wail like a Comanche when I explain this."

"Banshee."

"Hum?"

"People wail like banshees when they're upset by audacious lies told them by former lady-friends."

"This isn't a lie," she insisted. "Oh, admittedly I have fibbed to you in the past, Wes, but—"

"Fibbed? You've concocted elaborate webs of falsehood and—"

"But I always return to you," she pointed out. "You're my haven in a—"

"Who is this defunct individual, Casey?"

"Well, it's Carlos."

"Carlos?"

"Carlos Martinez, the movie producer."

"Never heard of him. But

telling me his profession still doesn't enlighten me any as to why—"

"I met Carlos at the travel agency when I went to buy my ticket to Paris."

"Is that where you went first?"

"I was intending to hit Paris first, then Spain. But Carlos—he's a very attractive man. I don't know if you can tell that from the angle you're sitting at. Also quite persuasive and—"

"You don't have your money any more, do you?"

"Not all of it," she admitted.

"Not much of it, in fact."

"You financed a movie?"

"A low budget film," she said.

"Jesus, Casey."

"Oh, Carlos wasn't a wimwam artist. He—"

"Flimflam," corrected Wes, frowning down at the body.

"We actually made a film down there."

"Down where?"

"Brazil. That's what all this is about, more or less," she said.

"The movie was entitled *Death Virgins of the Amazon*."

"Another Jane Austen adaptation, was it?"

"I suppose you have some right to be miffed and to make snide—"

"Miffed barely describes my feelings."

"Well, this wasn't a porn film or anything," she told him. "I was only very occasionally naked."

"Let's get to the part where you explain how Carlos here made the transition from schlock movie producer to dead man in my house."

"It was," she said, "natural causes. Pretty much."

"His death you're talking about?"

Casey nodded. "Some people got hold of Carlos and asked him a lot of questions," she explained in a pale voice. "They were very eager for answers and . . . well, they gave him a thorough rolling over."

"Going over. Who did this?"

"I'm not exactly certain." She pointed at the body with one foot. "If you were to turn poor Carlos over, you'd notice that he's pretty badly bunged up. Bruises and welts and such."

"How'd he die?"

"His heart, I think," she replied. "Either the rough stuff did it or the running."

"What running?"

"He was able to get away from them, and then he ran for his life. As far as a bar here in Santa Rita Beach," she explained. "He called me from there to come pick him up."

Wes pointed at the floor. "The people who smacked Carlos around in the course of their inquiry—they live right here in the same town?"

"No, over in Sea Vista, I think. Carlos ran quite a way."

"And where exactly did the guy die?"

"It was in my car—I'm driving a '95 Mercedes now, by the way. I managed to hold on to that."

"Okay, Carlos apparently has a fatal heart attack. He expires in your Mercedes." Wes paused. "How does that account for his being stretched out in my damned living room?"

"Well, I wasn't sure he was dead and—I realized we weren't more than a mile from your place. So I brought the poor man here in hopes I could revive him—or that maybe you could if you were home because I remembered you took that lifesaving course that time at the Santa Monica Y."

"And you still have your key?"

"Of course." She gave his arm a brief pat.

Wes studied the cream-colored ceiling for a few silent seconds. "You didn't succeed in reviving him, obviously," he said. "Where does the garbage bag come in?"

"Surely you don't want a corpse in your cottage, Wes?"

"They have services that take care of stuff like this," he told her. "So we'll call the police and—"

"That wouldn't be especially smart."

"None of this is smart, but—"

"I have absolutely no notion what these terrible people want-

ed from Carlos," Casey said. "Although I suspect it's some sort of valuable object they think was in his possession."

"What sort of valuable object?"

She shrugged one shoulder.

"That I don't know. But probably something he acquired while we were in Brazil."

"Narcotics?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. Carlos wasn't into smuggling."

"Then let's call the cops and—"

"That would bring me into it."

Casey took hold of his hand. "Which might provoke these people to come hunting for me. Under the mistaken notion that I know something."

"Which you don't?"

Casey looked him in the eye. "Did I just assure you of that, Wes? You have my word."

"Casey, you're a veteran liar," he reminded her.

"This time, so help me, I'm being absolutely honest with you."

Wes got up and walked over to the windows. He looked out at the dark Pacific. "What is it you want to do with Carlos?"

"Dump him someplace."

"That's not particularly sentimental."

"We weren't lovers."

"Oh well then, it's okay. Friends and business associates you can toss anywhere once they're dead."

She rubbed at her nose with

her forefinger. "I feel depressed enough already without your razzing me."

"What's the garbage bag for?"

"I guess I'm squeamish. The idea of his body lying directly on my back seat makes me feel uneasy. Putting him inside a bag will be . . . well, more sanitary."

He continued to study the rainy night. "How long have you been back in L.A.?"

"Three weeks or so."

"Were you planning to look me up?"

"Certainly, yes. But I had to get completely clear—in a business sense—from Carlos first," Casey said, crossing her legs. "I'm sorry that I've treated you somewhat badly in the past, but—"

"Badly? You've imposed on me, involved me in larcenous scams, duplicitous con games, kidnappings, and—"

"Hey, I was the one who got kidnapped," she pointed out, standing up. "You can't blame me for that."

"Where are you staying at the moment?"

"I was subletting a place over in Woodland Hills. But I don't guess I can go back there."

"The goons know about it?"

"They may." Skirting the corpse, she walked over to him.

"If you can put me up, that'd be great. For a few days at least."

"And what about Carlos?"

"We'll have to dispose of him and then—"

"No, nope, not at all," he told her.

"But he died a natural death. Really."

"That's not the point. I'm not going to be a party to leaving a body in a ditch in Oxnard or someplace."

She took hold of his arm. "We wouldn't have to drive as far as Oxnard," she said. "I saw a neat vacant lot not more than a couple of miles from—"

"No. I can't help you on this at all, Casey," he said. "And you can't stay here."

Shrugging, she stepped back from him. "Well, could you at least give me a hand getting Carlos out to my car?"

"A corpse? A dead body? A stiff?" inquired Mike Filchock.

Wes made an anxious lower-your-volume gesture with his left hand. "Yes, all of the above." Hunching farther down on his side of the restaurant booth, he added in a near whisper, "Smack dab in the middle of my living room."

Across the narrow table the redheaded screenwriter put

down his coffee cup. "Has Dracula's Daughter gone into the free-lance undertaking business?"

"It's a complicated story."

"And quite probably, if you heard it from Casey's dainty lips, it's also a complete, absolute, and total lie," suggested Filchuck. "But tell me anyhow, even though I was planning to spend the entire lunch hour today informing you about my new sitcom, entitled *Cappuccino*."

"What happened to *Dinah's Diner*?"

"This is the same basic concept, old chum, upgraded considerably. Very trendy now, it's set in a coffeehouse."

"Isn't CBS going to do a comedy about a coffeehouse?"

"So?"

Wes said, "I don't have to tell you about my problems, Mike."

"No, tell me, tell me," invited his friend in a manner that was a few degrees below lukewarm.

After tapping his fingers on the Stookie's Restaurant menu for a few seconds, Wes gave him a fairly detailed account of his encounter last evening with Casey McLeod and the remains of Carlos Martinez.

When he'd concluded, Filchuck said, "I do believe these therapy sessions with me are finally beginning to take effect, young man. You actually tossed Little Iodine out into the snow last night. That's progress."

"Hell, I'm still attracted to her, Mike," he admitted, "but I can't go helping her bury dead bodies."

"Which proves you haven't been completely tainted by working in Hollywood," said Filchuck. "Have any of the papers mentioned Carlos's demise? And where his last remains ended up?"

"I read them all at the studio this morning," he answered, shaking his head. "Not a mention."

"Then maybe she did a crackerjack job of disposing of Carlos or . . . hold it." The redhaired writer sat up straighter. "My declining brain is trying to communicate with me." He turned away, stared for a moment out the restaurant window and into the sunbright Studio City street. "Carlos Martinez. I knew the guy. Not well, obviously, which is why I didn't immediately respond—and also why I'm not shedding tears at the news of his untimely death."

"He really was a movie producer, then?"

Filchuck's laugh was brief and cynical. "Carlos was chauffeur, handyman, and bodyguard for Ernie Podestow, Jr."

"The head of Millstone Productions?"

"That Ernie Podestow, Jr., yes."

"This might be a different Carlos Martinez."

"Nope, it's my Carlos. Description and mode of operation fit," his friend assured him. "Did you ever hear of something called irony? You guys who work in animation don't use it much, but it comes in handy with wits such as myself. Point is—it's ironic that Casey, acknowledged Queen of Confidence Games, was outfoxed by Carlos."

Wes picked up his menu, set it down. "Was he still working for Podestow?"

Filchock shook his head. "Fired a couple of years ago," he answered. "It was right after they came back from some location shooting in Brazil for that godawful musical version of *Robinson Crusoe*."

"Brazil, huh? Same place Carlos went with Casey," said Wes, leaning back in the booth. "Any idea who'd be after the guy? Who'd want to torture him and—"

"Why do you persist in believing all this flapdoodle Casey hands out?" inquired his friend. "All you know for sure is that Carlos is now a lifeless corpse. You don't know for certain he was tortured or how in bloody blue blazes he actually died. Maybe, chum, Casey herself bopped the lad on the *cabeza* with a brick or—"

"No, Casey wouldn't kill anybody."

"Ah, so she does possess a rudimentary moral code. That's comforting to hear."

"She had a very rough childhood, Mike," he told his friend.

"So did Oliver Twist, but he turned out okay," Filchock told him. "Keep in mind that she's your only source of those facts and . . ." His voice suddenly trailed off.

"What is it?"

Frowning, Filchock was staring out into the bright afternoon street. "That's funny."

"What already?"

"I noticed a rather creepy chap—yes, I know Greater Los Angeles has more creepy chaps than any other spot in the universe and was recently voted Creepy Chap Center of the Western World, but nevertheless, this particular creepy chap caught my attention because he's stopped by yonder window twice now. And I have the distinct impression the guy's ogling you."

Wes squinted, staring out the window. "I don't see him."

"He's taken his leave," said Filchock. "Shaggy fellow with long blond hair and a full beard."

"I haven't noticed anybody like that tailing me today."

Filchock shrugged. "Could be nothing, probably is," he said.

"On the other hand, old chum, it might be a side effect of the return of Southern California's answer to Lizzie Borden into your life."

Wes was hunched slightly and leaning far to the left at the edge of the window in his middle-sized office at the Sparey Arts Animation Studios. Could that be the creep Mike noticed at lunch? he asked himself, eyes narrowing.

Out in the late afternoon, sitting across the street and down the block on a bus bench that announced ELLISON BROS. FUNERAL SERVICES—YOU HAVE OUR DEEPEST SYMPATHY!!, was a tall thin blond man with shoulder-length hair and a long curly beard.

"But this guy's tattooed. Mike didn't mention any decorations."

His phone rang, and Wes flinched.

He trotted back to his drawing board, which had a storyboard for a thirty second animated FatZo Imitation Lard commercial tacked to it, and grabbed the phone off the taboret. "Wes Goodhill," he said as he sat down.

"Can you talk?"

"I'm alone if that's what you mean, Casey," he said into the phone. "However, I'm not sure I want to have a—"

"I know, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have lied to you about Carlos."

"You lied to me about him? I wasn't even referring to that." His grip on the phone tightened. "I was actually talking about the whole business of dumping his corpse in the middle of my . . . how lied?"

Casey was speaking in a low, careful voice. "Well, I really was sort of . . . um . . . friendly with him. You know how show business is, especially when you're on location up the Amazon."

"Even worse than being an animator in Studio City, huh? In terms of temptation, that is."

"Can you please knock off the cyclical remarks and pay attention?" Casey said. "I really am in serious trouble here."

"What happened with . . . the remains?"

"Let's just say they're safely out of the way for now," she assured him. "The reason, by the way, I'm bothering you at work is that they've probably put a bug on your home telephone by now."

"Tapped my home phone—who?"

"The South American revolutionaries."

He glanced at the drawings he'd been making of tap-dancing porkchops splashing around in boiling FatZo. "I thought you mentioned something about being truthful, Casey?"

"This is, so help me—you can't see this, but I'm crossing my heart and hoping to die, Wes—I'm telling you the absolute unvarnished truth."

"Unvarnished. Why would South American revolutionaries be interested in me?"

"Somebody has probably tipped them off to the fact that you're my dearest and most trusted friend in the world."

"That's touching," he observed. "By the way, speaking of revolutionaries and spies—do you know a spooky-looking guy, about forty, long blond hair and beard, and tattooed?"

"How'd you know about Brad?"

"Brad? What kind of a name is that for a Brazilian terrorist?"

She cleared her throat. "Well, you could be describing the fellow who wrote the revised script for *Death Virgins of the Amazon*. He was with us on location, and also played the part of the High Priest. Brad's not much of an actor, but he has a very convincing beard. He and Carlos had a squabble about money, and he walked off the location. Well, paddled, actually, in one of those cute native canoes."

"And why would Brad be following me around?"

"This might not be Brad, you know. Did you get a close look at his tattoos? He's got the Sinking of the Titanic right across here

and on this arm there's a cowboy on a white—"

"I didn't think it wise to get close enough to scrutinize the guy's artwork," he cut in. "Get on to what the hell this is all about."

"Well, I didn't allude to this before, Wes, but Carlos sort of gave me something to look after for him," Casey admitted. "I still don't see how these people found out about that."

"Perhaps he mentioned it while they were torturing him."

"That must be it, yes," she said. "The bottom line is that I seem to be up the canal."

"Creek."

"There, too. The point is that I'm afraid these people intend to hurt me seriously."

"Why not simply give them whatever it is Carlos passed on to you?"

"They might hurt me anyway," she said in an unhappy voice. "It's that old situation where I probably, so they believe, know too much."

"Thank God I'm not in that position—since I don't know much of anything about this mess."

"Listen, do you think you can shake Brad—or whoever that is—and keep him from following you someplace?"

"Probably, but what's my motivation?"

"You're helping me to save my life."

"How?"

"I want you to look at something tonight," she explained. "Sort of a movie."

"Not *Death Virgins of the Amazon*?"

"No, this is only about ten or so minutes of film, on a video cassette."

"Why do you want me to—"

"I have to get off this phone real soon, Wes. Listen carefully now," she told him. "Tonight at exactly eleven be at the main gate at the old shutdown Wheelan Studios. That's the one out in Burbank. The night watchman there is a friend of mine. His name is Pop."

"Not really?"

"Pay attention. Ask him for Mrs. Rasmussen, and tell him you're Otto."

"You're Mrs. Rasmussen?"

"It's code, dopey."

"This isn't going to involve burying anyone?"

"All it's going to involve is saving my backside," she told him. "Don't let anybody follow you. In fact, it's probably a good idea for you not to go home tonight."

"You think there'll be somebody lurking around my place?"

"It's best to be on the safe side, darling," said Casey. "Eleven, okay?"

By the time he got around to

saying, "Okay," her end of the phone had gone dead.

Pop wasn't at the main gate to the darkened Wheelan Studios when Wes pulled up at two minutes shy of eleven on that dark, cloudy night.

The high wrought-iron gate, however, was open wide.

"The absence of Pop," he said, "is not an especially good omen."

He took a slow breath in and out, nodded to himself, and drove through the open gateway.

Wes guided his car over to the nearest parking area, a small lot surrounded by stunted palm trees. A faded sign nailed to one of the trees warned EXECUTIVE PARKING ONLY. ALL OTHERS WILL BE TOWED.

Wes parked there, his was the only car, and turned off the engine. He stretched up and flipped the switch on his overhead light so it wouldn't go on when he opened the door.

"Maybe I should've had Mike borrow a prop gun from his studio," he murmured as he very carefully eased his door open and left the car.

Off in the hills somewhere a coyote howled. Closer at hand something that might be crickets were chirping or doing whatever it was crickets do. Rub their legs together? Or was it grasshoppers who did that?

He remained there for a few moments, listening and watching, beside his car.

Without the night watchman to guide him, he didn't know how he was going to locate Casey. "If she's even here."

To his right, enormous dark shapes in the blurred night, he could make out three sound stages. Directly in front of him was a complex of office buildings, each one with a slanting red tile roof. There didn't seem to be a light showing anywhere on the entire twenty acre spread.

Then he heard a gunshot.

He spun to his left and saw the flash of a second shot.

It was over in the area beyond the office buildings, where the few remaining standing sets rose up.

"Hop in your damn car," he advised himself, "and get the hell away."

But now a woman screamed.

It sounded very much like Casey.

Ducking low, Wes went running in the direction of whatever was going on.

There were two more shots. A man cried out in pain. Someone fell down a wooden staircase.

Taking a cautious route, Wes was moving along a sandy street on the rundown Arabian Nights set, making his way carefully by

stucco-front shops, cafes, towers, and minarets.

He slowed as he came to the final one, a ramshackle restaurant with an arched doorway. The shooting and the screaming should be going on just around the corner from here. He risked a look.

By a gloomy Victorian mansion, probably used in 1940's horror movies, he spotted the beam of a flashlight.

But the light was lying on the ground. And next to it, at the bottom of a swaybacked row of wooden steps, was a shadowy sprawl that was probably a fallen man.

"But, honestly, Brad, I don't have it."

That was Casey.

Wes spotted her standing next to the sun dial on the overgrown lawn of the haunted mansion. Facing her, his back to Wes, was a lean man with long blond hair and beard. There was a revolver in his left hand.

"Carlos gave the damned thing to you, hon," he told her in a high-pitched nasal voice.

Wes backed up, glancing around. He moved as quietly as possible across the stretch of weathered mosaic tile sidewalk in front of the Baghdad restaurant and eased slowly inside.

From one of the small round

tables Wes selected a heavy brass bottle, making certain it was real and not a breakaway. Clutching it in his right hand, he went back out into the moonless night.

"If you hadn't gone and shot Mr. Podestow's henchman, Brad, he would have told you that poor Carlos turned that video over to them. Right after they tortured him."

"Then why was he waving a .45 automatic at you when I caught up with you?"

"Well, that's simple. As I was saying to somebody else only this afternoon, it's because I know too much. Even if Mr. Podestow has that incriminating footage, why, they don't want me to *talk*. To the police or CNN or *The National Intruder* or tabloid television. Well, bop him for goodness sake!"

"Huh?" Wes was still about three feet from the unsuspecting Brad when Casey, impatient, had urged him to get on with incapacitating the tattooed man. He lunged, hit Brad hard over the top of the skull.

Brad buckled, dropping his gun.

Wes hit him again, harder, then twice more.

Brad's long blond hair went swirling all around him as he fell face down into the weeds and passed into unconscious-

ness. He was stretched out at the feet of a bronze elk.

"Thank you, darling," said Casey. "The evening sure as heck hasn't been going as I planned."

"You spoiled the element of surprise," Wes mentioned, frowning, "by urging me to conk him."

"I'm sorry, yes. It's just that I've had so many people pointing guns at me tonight that I got a little bit irrational, I guess." Stepping around the fallen Brad, she came over and hugged Wes, kissing him on the cheek twice.

"Is the one over there dead?" he asked, moving clear of her.

"Yes, far as I know," she replied. "We'd better go now, Wes."

"What about Brad?" He nudged the man with his foot.

"Oh, right, glad you reminded me. We'll have to truss him up and leave him here," said Casey, frowning down at the body in the weeds. "Once we're safely out of Burbank we—you, that is—can make an anonymous call to the police."

"And where's Pop?"

"Grossman—that's the dead one over on the stairs—told me he tied him up and dumped him in a shed. You can inform the police about that, too," she said.

"I have this nagging feeling," he mentioned to her, "that you

still haven't told me the truth, Casey."

"Not entirely, no," she conceded. "Right now, though, let's find some rope."

Seagulls, a bunch of them, were circling low in the hazy afternoon sky, shrieking.

Wes, alone, was sitting on a large, twisted chunk of driftwood, a chunk so ugly and unattractive that nobody had bothered to take it home to decorate a living room, den, or deck in the years since it had washed ashore. He had his elbows resting on his knees and was gazing out across the Pacific in the general direction of Hawaii.

When he heard footsteps come crunching down across the sand in his direction, he jumped up and turned around, prepared to duck. Then, shrugging, he sat down again and returned to watching the ocean.

"You didn't go into Sparey Arts today," remarked Filchock, who was clad in a double-breasted black blazer that was rich with gold buttons and white duck trousers.

"They aren't auditioning for a revival of *Gilligan's Island*, are they?"

"I'm going to allow you to insult my impeccable seaside wardrobe," said his friend, squatting down beside the chunk

of driftwood, "since I know you had a night of traumatic experiences. What did you tell them at the toon factory?"

"That I have the flu. A new Brazilian strain."

"I read over all the newspaper accounts pertaining to festivities out at the old Wheelan lot last night."

"So did I."

"I take it you're the anonymous caller who told the cops where to go look?"

"That's me, yeah," Wes admitted.

"According to informed sources, this Brad chap was attempting to blackmail Ernie Podestow, Jr., well-known local movie mogul," said Filchock. "I note that Brad made no mention of Casey at all. Didn't mention that she was there or that she, far as he knows, blew the whistle on him."

"Casey seems to affect some guys that way," said Wes. "They're reluctant to implicate her. It's happened before."

"In Brad's position, it's best not to talk about anybody," observed his friend. "Nobody seems to know about Carlos's whereabouts either."

"Including me."

"There was a videocassette," continued Filchock, "taken down in Brazil back when they were making that godawful singing *Robinson Crusoe*, which

shows Podestow doing serious bodily harm to a young actress, who subsequently died. Up until today he was never linked with that particular crime."

"Yep."

"That's what Carlos Martinez had hold of and passed on to the incomparable Casey?"

Wes answered, "Carlos shot the stuff with a hidden camera while he was still gainfully employed by Podestow, yeah. Since he was on good terms with his boss at that point, Carlos just turned the video over to a friend down there in Rio to keep for him. After he got bounced, Carlos decided he might be able to sell that footage to his former employer for a sizable amount."

"Took him long enough."

"Carlos wasn't too good at living within a budget, and he ran out of money before he could get a ticket back to Brazil. Then he met Casey."

"She didn't know his real motive for wanting to revisit the Amazon?"

"She says not, and they really did make a movie down there—if you consider *Death Virgins of the Amazon* classifiable as a movie."

"Have you winnowed any more facts out of the load of baloney she's fed you?"

"While they were down there making the movie, Casey found out something about the cas-

sette, since she and Carlos were . . . well, friendly."

"And how did Brad find out about it and try to hijack it?"

"Casey says she doesn't know, but it's possible she may've let slip a hint or two."

"So Carlos came back here to try to blackmail Podestow, and Brad was tracking them both and hoping to get in on it?"

"Yeah, except Podestow sends some heavies to persuade Carlos to donate the tape to him free of charge."

"Carlos dies, Casey inherits the tape," said Filchock. "I still don't see why you keep allowing this woman to reenter your otherwise fairly rational life with such alarming frequency, old buddy."

"When she's not involved in some intrigue or scam or get-rich-quick scheme, she's not a bad person, Mike," he explained. "I don't know, I just like her, and she's very attractive."

"So is a Venus flytrap."

"There's a game we played when I was a kid, called Hangman," said Wes slowly. "You have to get to the right word in so many tries. Each time you guess wrong, you draw part of the gallows and then, if you still keep making mistakes, you draw the body hanging from the rope. Eventually you either guess right or you hang."

"So when Casey comes to you

with some mess," said Filchock, "you feel it's your job to solve the problem before she gets herself hanged?"

"Something like that."

"How'd the cassette get in the hands of the Santa Rita Beach *Daily Standard*?"

"It's my hometown paper. I dropped it in their mail chute middle of last night, with a note."

"Didn't Casey protest?" the redhaired writer asked. "It's my notion, not being under her spell, that she was planning to take over the blackmailing of Podestow and wanted you as a bodyguard when she had the meeting last night with his goon. But then Brad tracked her there and screwed things up, and in the ensuing scrabble the goon got shot."

"Casey says she doesn't know how they trailed her to the Wheelan Studios. And she wasn't going to blackmail anybody," said Wes. "She wanted me to see the film in case something happened to her. So I'd be able to go to the police."

"What about the tape—did she hand it over to you?"

Wes studied the ocean. "Actually, I swiped it from her purse while she was trussing up Brad."

"What'd she say when she found out?"

"Don't know."

Filchock pointed a thumb in

the direction of his friend's cottage. "Isn't the Spider Woman currently in residence up yonder?"

"I don't know where she is," admitted Wes. "While we were driving through Santa Monica last night, she asked me to stop at a twenty-four-hour pharmacy. She went in the front way—never came out."

"Foul play?"

"Nope. I went in and asked about her. She'd used the back exit." He took a folded sheet of prescription paper out of his shirt pocket. "She left this with the clerk for me."

The note, printed in streaky ballpoint, said, "Wes dear—I think it best if I vanish for a spell. I wasn't completely truthful. I do have some money left, and I think I'd like to make another movie. But not in Brazil. See you. Love, Casey. SWAK."

When Filchock finished reading the message, he inquired, "SWAK?"

"Sealed with a kiss," translated Wes.

"Oy, that's touching." He handed the note back and stood up. "Congratulations," he added, brushing sand off his pants. "With any luck you'll never see her again."

"That's what I'm afraid of," said Wes.



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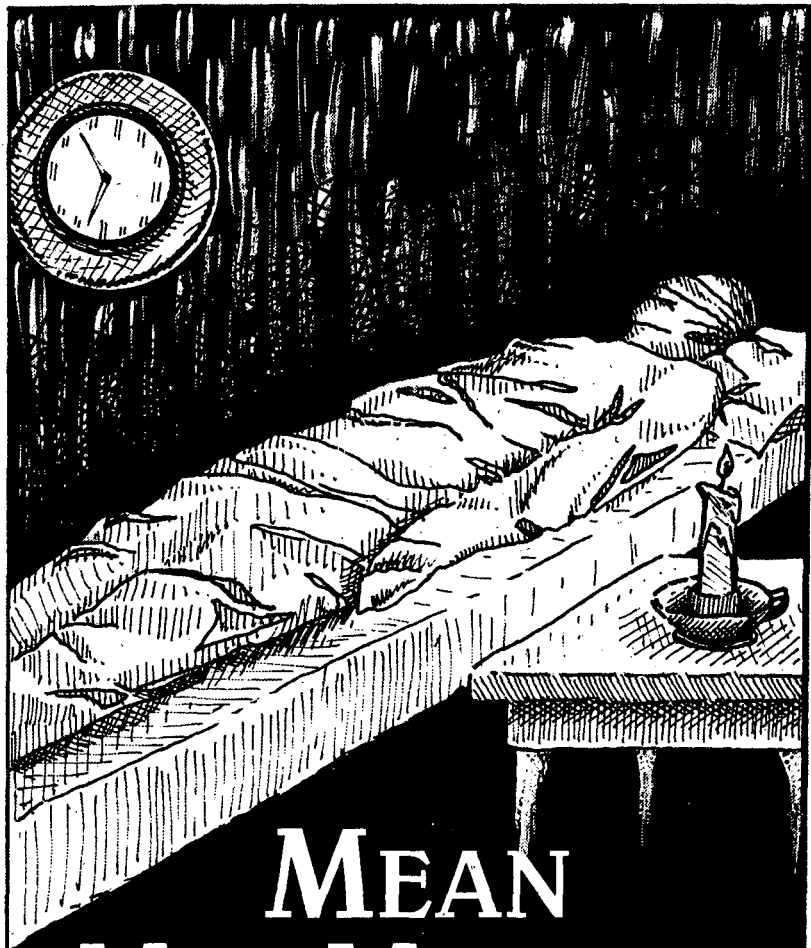


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*Not all ingredients listed.



FICTION



MEAN MR. MULLINS Cathy Sahu

Illustration by Laurie Davis

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/97

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

“The old man can't last much longer at the rate he's going,” Dr. Chisholm said on his way out. “By those latest blood gas results, he should be dead already. Though he's fooled me before—he's been at the brink of death more than once, only to rally at the last hour.”

Melanie stood at the wide oak doorway of the old mansion trying to look calm and disinterested, and not show how scared she was to see the doctor going—leaving her alone again with that awful old man, her patient. The doctor had always been friendly enough to her, but he was a busy man and had no time to give advice. And after all, it wasn't his fault if she had taken on more than she could handle. Melanie wasn't a certified nurse yet—she was merely a cheaper substitute. But this fall she hoped to start classes for her R.N., and complaining about a weak old man's behavior, however inappropriate, would not be a propitious way to start out in her new career. So she was resolved to say nothing.

“Not that you should let it bother you,” the doctor added over his shoulder as he hurried down the stairs to his Mercedes-Benz. “If what I hear about the old buzzard is true, he hasn't given you or anyone else reason to mourn his passing.”

She watched the doctor's car disappear down the roadway to town and turned reluctantly back to the house, feeling a little guilty because the doctor had thought she was sad about Mr. Mullins' dying and she didn't feel that way at all. She guessed she should—he was kin after all—but the fact was that she didn't. Though going back into the dark old house and shutting the heavy door behind her *did* make her feel like crying.

The doctor's visit, so quickly over, was the one bright spot in the long, leaden day—he wasn't afraid of Mr. Mullins, nor did he seem at all affected by the gloom that hung so heavily over the place. Cheerful, confident, and loud, Dr. Chisholm brought in a breath of fresh air from the outside world and made Mr. Mullins seem, by contrast, not so large and looming—made him appear what he really was, a very frail, very sick old man.

Mr. Mullins was docile during Dr. Chisholm's visits. He looked like he wouldn't hurt a fly. The housekeeper, before she had been sent away, had told Melanie that Mr. Mullins behaved so well toward Dr. Chisholm because he was afraid of the doctor's temper, which was legendary in the community. He'd once had a nurse dismissed for answering him back during a crisis in the emergency room, and he could be just as ruthless with his patients. If you did-

~~~~~  
n't follow his orders, or even complained too much, he refused to treat you. And no one wanted to risk having that happen because he was the best doctor in town.

Every day, after the doctor left, Melanie would try to adopt his hearty and impervious manner, though it didn't come naturally to her at all. Now she resolutely climbed the stairs to her patient's room and said (in what she hoped was a no-nonsense voice), "Mr. Mullins, it's time for your protein drink."

Mr. Mullins was usually in one of two moods, good or bad. For Melanie, his good mood was worse than his bad because when in a bad mood he simply insulted and berated her and she could get away relatively quickly. But when he was in a good mood, he liked her company. He thought up reasons to keep her in the room, and then, of course, there were the little tricks he liked to play.

"My protein drink!" Mr. Mullins cackled jovially. "Just what I need to give me a little boost where I need it most—although I'm sure, my dear," he leered as Melanie poured the contents of a very expensive little can into a tumbler, "that your presence is as much of a stimulant as any redblooded male could handle."

So he was in a good mood this afternoon. He had fished around for reassurance from Dr. Chisholm that his condition wasn't hopeless, and when the doctor made vague reference to some possibly encouraging exam results, Mr. Mullins had found reason to rejoice.

But he could only take a few sips of his protein drink before his stomach was full. When Melanie came back to take away the glass, he said in a teasing voice, "I have a little surprise for you."

She quailed to hear those words but turned and waited.

"Don't you want to know what it is?" the old man cried out, seemingly disappointed by her lack of enthusiasm.

Now, here was the sort of thing that drove Melanie to distraction. Of course she didn't want to know what it was, she didn't want any presents from him. But if she told him that, she'd never hear the end of it. And if she said she *did* want to know, he'd spend the next fifteen minutes making her play guessing games.

"Don't you *want* to know what it is?" he repeated, fairly yelling this time.

"I don't know," she said miserably.

"You don't know?" Mr. Mullins repeated. "You don't know? You're a quick thinker, aren't you, nurse? Bet you do just great at school. Don't know why I'm subsidizing you when you can't even answer a simple yes-or-no question. Well, can you?" he asked, after a pause.





"Can I what?" Melanie asked.

"Answer a simple yes-or-no question?"

"I guess so," Melanie replied.

"Well then," Mr. Mullins continued, smiling excitedly, "I've got a little something for you. Do you want it or not?"

"Yes," said Melanie. "I guess so."

"Put your hands under the covers then."

Melanie stared at the wizened old man. It was true that he often made lascivious jokes, but she had never had to worry about his actually *doing* anything before.

"Go ahead—put your hands under the covers," he gurgled, "and feel around."

Melanie was sure that a more experienced nurse would never let herself be put in this position, but how to get out of it? If she refused, Mr. Mullins would keep bantering at her. If she said it was improper, he'd accuse her of having a dirty mind, and *that* would supply him with ammunition indefinitely. Melanie felt her face getting red—soon Mr. Mullins would notice it and start teasing her about that. She figured she'd just better get it over with as soon as possible and started feeling around on top of the bedspread, looking for lumps.

"No, you idiot!" Mr. Mullins cried. "How are you going to find anything that way? Put your hands *under* the covers."

Awkwardly, gingerly, Melanie passed her hands between the two smooth, freshly laundered sheets—she had just changed them this morning—avoiding Mr. Mullins' scrawny limbs as well as she could. Was she looking for something small or big? She didn't want to ask. Mr. Mullins was chuckling delightedly.

"Oh!" Melanie cried. Something had caught her hand. She dragged it out to find her first three fingers caught in a mousetrap fastened to the top of a little tin box. They tingled painfully as she pulled them loose. Mr. Mullins was wheezing with laughter as Melanie blinked back the tears.

Suddenly he stopped laughing. "Oh dear," he cried, looking at her closely. "I hope you're not hurt, are you? Those things aren't supposed to *hurt* really."

Melanie shook her head, her throat too tight to speak.

"I'm so sorry, Melanie, really I am," said Mr. Mullins after looking at her penitently for several seconds. "You know I never want to cause you any discomfort. It's just that I get so bored lying here all day with nothing to do."

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"It's all right," Melanie mumbled.

"Well, at any rate," he said cheerfully, "you'll forgive me when you see what's in the box. You like chocolate, don't you? Didn't you say that you liked chocolate?"

Melanie nodded, concentrating on keeping her composure until she could get away.

"Well then. Go ahead, open it," the old man said.

She had trouble prying open the box because of her hurt fingers, but she knew he would insist on her trying the chocolate in front of him. She felt she couldn't stand to eat anything right now, especially not with those rheumy blue eyes staring at her. But finally she pulled the lid off.

Something sprang out, high over her head, and then fell on her. In her nervous state she couldn't help screaming even though she knew before she screamed that it was just a coiled spring covered with cloth and painted to look like a snake.

Mr. Mullins was laughing his wheezy, chokey laughter again, hunched forward in bed and holding onto his knees with his bony hands for support. Melanie picked up the cloth snake, put it with the box on the table, and walked quickly out—but not before Mr. Mullins saw her face all twisted up and red with incipient tears.

"Hey, nurse!" he called after her. "Don't ya want your chocolate?" And he held up the box, at the bottom of which was one fat, dusty bonbon, its chocolate coating whitened with age.

"That was a great one!" Mr. Mullins wheezed, and for the next several minutes he alternately laughed and concentrated on getting his breath back. This is the way I want to go, he thought to himself: laughing. What a silly ninny of a girl. Real luck finding her—most of those nurse's aides were too hardboiled to have any fun with. And what a stroke of serendipity for her to be a relative! He had always hated his relatives, and since he had grown old, he hated young people, too. Above all he hated people who had no sense of humor. He saw it as his duty, as well as his pleasure, to teach people like that a lesson.

Now he could spend the rest of the day savoring his victory. "I almost scared her to death!" he said aloud, cackling again.

Suddenly another brilliant idea occurred to him. Everybody thought that he was dying, which gave him the perfect opportunity for—for what? This would take some thought and careful planning, but it would be more than worthwhile. He had about used up his stock of rubber mice and dribble glasses, but this would be some-

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thing completely different. Something simple, elegant—subtle but potent—would meet the bill this time. “I *almost* scared her to death,” he repeated musingly. “I wonder . . . I wonder how close I could come to *really* doing it.”

Melanie spent the rest of the afternoon downstairs crying. She was ashamed of herself but couldn't help it. The hurt fingers and the cloth snake scare were the least of it. She was lonely and homesick. She missed her family so much—coming from a big one, she had never even known what loneliness felt like until now. It was horrible.

But she couldn't go back home. This was her only chance for nursing school any time in the near future—she had saved up enough money for tuition and books, but there was little left over for food and lodging. Her grades, though solid, weren't good enough to qualify for a scholarship, and the counselor had said the curriculum was much too heavy for students to try to work while attending classes.

The family had talked it over, and finally her mother had remembered a well-to-do cousin, now dead, who had a surviving husband in the college town. Mother had written to him explaining the problem, and Mr. Mullins had written back to say Melanie was welcome to stay at his house while attending school if she was willing to help around the house a bit in return.

Once Melanie arrived and, grateful and eager to please, had shown him what a good cook she was and how careful a housekeeper, Mr. Mullins had let his own housekeeper go and told her she would do just fine for him by herself. Melanie had felt horrible for the housekeeper, but Mrs. Packard said it was all right, that she would find another job with her agency very soon and, in fact, would take this opportunity to go on a little vacation first.

“I'm going somewhere sunny and warm,” Mrs. Packard had said. “This old house is the gloomiest old mausoleum I've ever worked in. The one I feel sorry for is you—cooped up here all by yourself with that old devil. He's notorious for his stinginess, you know. That mean old man never did anything for anybody unless he could demand twice as much in return.” Mrs. Packard had promised to send a postcard from the beach, and every day Melanie checked through the mail carefully but it was always junk.

For the rest of the afternoon Mr. Mullins was quiet. He didn't call her once, and when she took up his dinner tray, he didn't bother her at all, or even leer at her *really*. Usually he gloated quite a bit after

he had succeeded in making her cry, but this evening he seemed preoccupied. He didn't eat much. He told her he wasn't feeling very well.

The next day he told Dr. Chisholm during his morning visit that he was feeling weaker. Dr. Chisholm's reply was noncommittal, but he said privately to Melanie that, although Mr. Mullins' signs and symptoms showed no real change from yesterday, he could be starting to go downhill.

"A lot of times it's the patient who tells the doctor he's dying, not the other way around," Dr. Chisholm said, folding up his stethoscope and cramming it into his suit pocket. "Although I always thought that he was in denial. Luckily he's a hospice patient—he doesn't want to be hospitalized under any circumstances. So if he starts sinking, don't call the paramedics. Just keep him comfortable, and let him go." And he drove off quickly—he was running late on his rounds.

Melanie had wanted to ask if there was any reason, any excuse she could use, to have someone come stay in the house with her while all this occurred, but the doctor had gone off too fast. She had already asked Mr. Mullins if her little sister could come to help with the cleaning, but he had flat-out refused.

Now she asked him again. "You and I don't need anyone else around," he rasped, holding tightly to her hand. "You'll stay with me to the end, won't you, sweetie? I'll make it worth your while." And then he turned away. Even this much speaking seemed to wear him out now. Melanie tried to go, but he tightened his grip on her hand. She watched him trying to catch his breath, the bones in his chest laboring. Finally he continued. "You can't leave me—you need a place to stay. Take care of me in my last moments, and you can stay here after I die. I've instructed my lawyer . . ." And once again he ran out of air. After a long interval Melanie pulled her hand away unresisted. He had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

The next morning was cloudy again, and when Melanie tried to turn on the little light over the kitchen table, it wouldn't work. She put in another bulb, but that didn't do any good, and soon she realized that all the lights were out all over the house. She told Mr. Mullins she would call the electric company, but he told her he had already called them—to have the electricity shut off.

"Why?" asked Melanie, for once more surprised than frightened.

"I can tell . . ." the old man wheezed, blinking wearily at her, "I'm

not going to be here much longer. . . . No use . . . wasting electricity  
"

Melanie couldn't believe what she was hearing. Maybe Mr. Mullins' ability to reason was leaving him.

"But your oxygen equipment!" she cried. "It won't work without electricity."

"What good does all that do me?" Mr. Mullins said with something of his old exasperation. "When it's time to go, it's . . . time to go . . ."

So there was nothing she could do except go search for candles in all the kitchen and dining room drawers. Luckily there were plenty, but she made a note to add candles to their grocery order that day. Then she tried to leave a message for Dr. Chisholm's answering service, but here was another surprise—the phone was dead. Mr. Mullins must have had that service cut off, too.

This was too much. Even though he had forbidden her to leave the house without asking him (and when she asked, he generally refused to let her go), she decided to go next door to call the doctor.

The distance between the two sprawling mansions was considerable. She ran all the way for fear Mr. Mullins might ring for her while she was gone. As she went up the neighbors' drive, two big Dobermans barked viciously and tried to leap over the fence at her.

The manservant who answered the door said the owners were not home. He didn't hide his suspicion that she was up to something and made her repeat her story several times before allowing her in to use the phone. Melanie left a message and then sat waiting awkwardly for a call back. But Dr. Chisholm was off that day and the doctor who did call back didn't seem to understand what she was talking about or care to waste any time trying. He ended by saying that the old man probably hadn't paid his electric bill, that there was nothing he could do about that, and that Dr. Chisholm would be back tomorrow.

The manservant escorted her out coldly, and Melanie slunk back to the house of Mr. Mullins. The day was cloudy still, and the big rooms were hung with shadows.

Mr. Mullins didn't seem to notice the gloom. He slept with his eyes rolled back in his head most of the time now, and he was not always clear about where he was or what time it was. She could rouse him long enough to sip a little soda, but he soon fell back into a stupor. At one point he whispered that the candles Melanie had lit made him dream he was in church. Was this his funeral service, he wanted to know.



Melanie, a regular churchgoer herself, was reminded more of old horror movies than anything else. She had a terrible case of the creeps, and all that long dark afternoon was constantly turning to see if someone or something was moving behind her, only to realize for the hundredth time that it was her own shadow moving with the flicker of the candlelight.

The television no longer worked, and there were very few books in the house. Mr. Mullins subscribed to no newspaper. He wanted no supper, and she herself couldn't eat. As afternoon slowly tolled into evening, she sat down in the living room, opposite the stairway, and waited.

Waited for death to make its visit.

The house was silent. Outside, night fell, and she studied the pool of light from the candle at her elbow, reflected in the black square of undraped window glass. It flickered noiselessly.

The question struck her, would she know when he was dead? Would he call her when he was about to go? Probably she should go up and sit with him, but he hadn't requested that of her, and she couldn't seem to force herself up the stairway. Darkness seemed to float down from it like smoke.

Of course, if he died without calling, she would know only because he *wouldn't* call her—she would wait for the bell to ring, and it wouldn't—that was all.

It could happen at any time. Maybe it had already . . .

She must have fallen asleep in the big old armchair she had curled up in. She dreamt she was going up the stairs, candle in hand, to answer that tinkling summons. Upon pushing open the heavy door to his room, she found him hunched up in his usual position, hands on knees, but this time, with a face like a skull—open eye sockets, dangling jaw, white hair streaming as if stirred by the heat of a furnace. Turning towards her, he raised the bell and swung it again between skeleton thumb and forefinger, ringing again, summoning her to come closer . . .

She awoke with a shriek—the bell *was* ringing.

For a long while she sat paralyzed with fear. The candle beside her, which, when she had fallen asleep, had been a full-sized taper, was now only an inch high. Other than that, there was no indication of how long she had slept or what hour of night it was. Outside it was dark, and inside, dark too, and still—except for the tinkling of the bell—incessant, incessant—then, finally, it stopped.

In the dead calm that followed, Melanie fervently asked God to

help her. Mr. Mullins was her patient, and he was calling. She had to go up there.

Mechanically reciting her prayers, she got up, found another candle, and, with trembling fingers, lit it. The candlestick wouldn't jam into the holder well, and she had to hold it with both hands as she climbed the stairs.

Unlike in her dream, the door to Mr. Mullins' room was ajar. She entered quietly, peering around the door at the bed where she could see him lying there, motionless. She stood for a moment just looking—two candles on tables at either side of the bed lit his body wrapped up in the white sheet she had placed over him just this morning. At that time she had carefully tucked the corners of the sheet under the mattress, but now they were pulled up and the old man's body lay swathed like a cocoon awaiting rebirth—or, more factually, like a corpse, neatly done up and ready for transport to the morgue.

The face was covered, too, the sheet drawn tightly around the skull. The arms were close at the sides of the chest, the legs straight. How could he have done this to himself, Melanie wondered in horror. She watched the chest for signs of respiration—she could see none. At times the candles flickered and the shadows they threw on the corpse's shrouding made it look as if there was some slight spasm or movement, but longer observation showed this to be an illusion and convinced Melanie that the corpse—for corpse it must be—was completely and finally at rest.

But to be sure she had to touch it—unwrap one of the arms, and feel the wrist for a pulse. Only then could she go find a phone and notify the doctor on call so that he would come and pronounce Mr. Mullins officially dead.

She approached the bed and, finding an edge of the sheet, started tugging it slowly and carefully out from underneath the body. The weight of the body and the uneven foam rubber surface of the eggcrate mattress beneath it made this difficult. She could feel her heart pounding and perspiration starting at the nape of her neck, though her hands were icy cold and trembling. That's just adrenaline, she told herself. I'm feeling panicky, but there's nothing to be afraid of, really. It's just a dead body. It can't hurt me. And in a moment I'll be out of the house—I'll find a pay phone . . . She got the sheet on that side partially unraveled, enough to slide her hand down the corpse's arm to its wrist. She felt for a pulse.

Suddenly the dead hand jerked, and before she could move away,



the bony fingers had seized her wrist. She tried desperately to tug herself loose, but the hand of Mr. Mullins would not let go. The sound of her own screaming was like a wind rushing in her ears as she saw the head and torso of the body rise, slowly rise to a sitting position. The face, though still wrapped in its shroud, turned toward her, the hand still grasped her tightly, and the body bowed forward to her in a most friendly, most intimate manner. From underneath the sheeting she heard the muffled voice of Mr. Mullins, deceased, cackling gleefully, "*I rang to let you know—I'm dead!*"

**T**he sun had just risen. Dr. Chisholm was planning to stop by Mr. Mullins' house earlier than usual that morning. His wife wanted him to attend an awards luncheon given by one of her many charities. Dr. Chisholm himself was to receive some minor token of appreciation, the thought of which embarrassed him greatly. But in a moment of weakness he had promised to go, and now, unless an emergency occurred, he would have to be there promptly at eleven forty-five. He hoped for an emergency.

About a quarter mile from Mr. Mullins' house he saw a girl walking quickly in the opposite direction. She was hugging her bare arms, and though her eyes were directed towards the sidewalk at her feet, Dr. Chisholm could tell she was crying. The girl looked familiar. Consistent with his belief that everyone owed him an explanation for everything, he rolled down his window and demanded to know what the girl was doing out here so early, without a jacket.

Melanie stopped but didn't say anything, her mouth closed tight and her eyes brimming with tears. Dr. Chisholm got out of the car. "What's wrong with you?" he asked.

"I'm going home," Melanie sobbed. "I don't want to be a nurse any more."

Enlightenment came to Dr. Chisholm. "You're that girl taking care of old Mullins, aren't you? Why aren't you at the house?"

"I can't go back there!" Melanie had to squeeze the words out between sobs, but she didn't care now if he saw her cry. It was all over. She tried to tell what had happened last night, but her story came out disconnectedly, in pieces.

"You mean you deserted your patient and you don't even know if he's dead or alive?" Dr. Chisholm said and, before she could reply, angrily commanded her to get into the car.

Melanie didn't think she had a choice, so she climbed in. Maybe

when he heard the whole story Dr. Chisholm would have her put in jail. As long as she didn't have to go back to that house . . .

He did drive back to the house, but he didn't try to get Melanie out of the car. He went in alone. Through the open front door Melanie could see him sprint upstairs.

Several minutes passed. Melanie became calm listening to the birds singing in the trees.

When Dr. Chisholm came down again, he barked at her, "Where's the housekeeper?"

"Mr. Mullins discharged her after I came," Melanie replied.

"Why didn't you quit, too?"

Melanie explained that she had never been hired, strictly speaking, but was more of a poor relation who had needed a place to stay.

Dr. Chisholm didn't reply but, redfaced and tight-lipped, went to the car trunk, opened it, got something out, and went back up again. Several minutes passed.

When he came out the second time and opened the passenger door, he didn't berate and threaten her as she had expected. Rather, he told her gently that Mr. Mullins was dead.

"You must have been dreaming about going up to his room and seeing him sit up," the doctor concluded. "He's been dead for some time, most likely before you ran out of the house."

"But I deserted my patient," said Melanie in a small voice. "I never should have run away."

"And a youngster like you should never have been left alone in a situation like this. But never mind, it's all over now, and you have nothing to feel ashamed of. Come on up now. You've got to get back on the horse. If you don't face your fears, they'll get blown all out of proportion."

Melanie tried to back out but finally followed Dr. Chisholm up the stairs and into Mr. Mullins' room one last time. The old man's body lay exposed, the sheets lying crumpled at the foot of the bed. "Let's give him a little more dignity," Dr. Chisholm said, and he proceeded to show her how to wash and wrap up the body in preparation for its being taken away. He talked gently to her the whole time about medicine and nursing, about life, and about death.

"You remind me of my youngest boy," he said after seeing Melanie smile at a slight joke he had made. "Not your coloring or general appearance—he was big and stocky, with red hair like mine—but he had a smile like yours, just like yours. Open and generous, unsuspecting . . . He was never much of a scholar—took after his mother's

side of the family—but he got into college on a football scholarship, which was lucky because with two others in school at the same time I couldn't have swung it otherwise."

The doctor paused. They had finished wrapping up the body. Melanie was straightening the room, and Dr. Chisholm stood absently trying to stuff his stethoscope into his suit pocket. "Somebody played a practical joke on him once. They gave him a bottle of whisky and bet him two hundred dollars that he couldn't drink it. He was homesick, just like you. He wanted the money to buy a plane ticket so he could come home for the long weekend that was coming up. He calculated that, with his bulk, he could just handle the amount of whisky they gave him—he was never any good at calculating. They carried him back to his room, and he died of alcohol poisoning that night."

Melanie stood silent for some moments as Dr. Chisholm blinked at the carpet, then wordlessly she accompanied him back to the car.

Mr. Mullins would have laughed out loud if he could have. This was the most fun he had had in years. First, scaring that little idiot into a screaming fit, which had been ridiculously easy. He had simply turned off most of the electrical service at the main box but left the circuit that served the rooms next to his. Then, after having her move his oxygen machine back there for storage, he had been able to sneak over and use it whenever he needed without her knowing a thing.

That set the stage. And after a suitable interval of play-acting, he had prepared himself for the finale. He wrapped himself up carefully in his own sheet (an exhausting task but well worth it) after making sure, of course, to place a stiff sheath of plastic from his desk blotter around his middle so she couldn't see his breathing. Then he had rung the bell—and the rest was history.

When Dr. Chisholm had burst in, Mr. Mullins had still been laughing. He told the doctor why and was pleasantly surprised when, instead of lecturing him like the spoilsport he appeared, the doctor had wanted to know all the details and had seemed to enjoy the whole thing immensely. He even suggested carrying the thing one step further. Since he had the girl downstairs in his car, he would bring her up and show her that Mr. Mullins was really dead. They would wrap him up again. Then, later on, when the girl was once again in the house alone, he would make a second resurrection and scare the living daylights out of her one more time. Dr.



Chisholm had left the time and manner of this last reanimation up to him, but when Mr. Mullins expressed doubt that he could lie still long enough for them to wrap him again (he was out of breath even now), the doctor had had a bright suggestion: there was a drug, he said, that would help Mr. Mullins relax—completely relax and calm his breathing, too. He would have trouble moving voluntarily but for a very short time only. Just a small injection, then he would bring the little bimbo up, show her he was dead, and when they moved him around, he would not flinch, involuntarily even.

Mr. Mullins had been a little wary of the needle part, but the doctor had said come on, where's your sense of humor? And of course Mr. Mullins had to rise to that challenge. Succinyl—succinyl something was what the doctor had shot into him, and Mr. Mullins had found it easy to lie completely still all the time they were in the room. What a hoot!

Now they were gone. Mr. Mullins tried to move his legs, but he couldn't. He couldn't move them an inch, nor his arms, nor his head. He couldn't even open his eyes and, ominously, even the muscles in his chest were weaker. But Dr. Chisholm had promised to come back and wait with him while the effects of the drug wore off, and he had promised, too, no complications.

Mr. Mullins heard two car doors slamming shut and an engine turning over. He felt a momentary thrill of panic. But of course Dr. Chisholm would have to make a show of leaving; then he would come right back as soon as the girl was off the trail. He'd be back in five minutes at the most. The doctor certainly had congratulated him most sincerely on last night's work, saying that Mr. Mullins could teach those college fraternity boys a thing or two.

The doctor had not been very gentle in giving Mr. Mullins that shot in his rump, though—that had hurt! If that was the young quack's idea of a joke, he would soon find out who he was playing with. No one had ever put one over on Ed Mullins.

Wait a minute—hadn't the doctor said once, a long time ago, that a shot in the rump lasted a long time? The short-acting ones were the ones that went directly into your veins. Or was it the other way around? It must be the other way around, Mr. Mullins thought timorously. He couldn't take much more of this. Even under the best of circumstances he couldn't lie flat for very long before his lungs started filling up with fluid. He slept hunched up on pillows at night. That stuff that the doctor had given him made him feel like he had a ton of bricks on his chest. He needed his oxygen badly. He

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struggled to lift his arm and reach to the side of the bed where the tank usually was . . . and remembered it was in the other room now. He had no hope of reaching it until the drug wore off completely. But if anything, the effect seemed to be getting stronger. Really, it was very unpleasant—almost unbearable. He couldn't shift himself to get any ease.

Though his body was immobile, his mind raced. He realized he was in a predicament, lying here in an empty house, wrapped up and left to await the arrival of the mortuary van. If they came and got him, he wouldn't be able to move a muscle to tell them he was alive, not dead. And if no one came to help soon, his lungs would fill up with fluid and he would suffocate.

But no need to panic. Best not to think about what if. Dr. Chisholm would be back any minute now.

Mr. Mullins couldn't open his eyes or turn his head to the wall where the clock was but surely quite a bit of time had gone by now. Waiting, Mr. Mullins became more and more displeased. Obviously Dr. Chisholm was playing some sort of joke. Waiting till the last minute, letting him lie here like this. Most likely he was laughing about it right now over his bacon and eggs. But he would come back. He had to come back, or Mr. Mullins would give him what for. He'd tell him—he'd tell him—Mr. Mullins whimpered mentally as waves of panic washed over him—*he'd tell him this wasn't funny!*

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

Anti-tow truck device. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "September Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the March Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

FICTION

The Burden

Sharon Mackey



It was one of those Friday afternoons. The clouds had moved down into the valley, making my classroom feel like an escape shelter except that the refugees had just been bombarded with graded midterm exams that only a few of them could possibly be proud of.

They'd already been complaining about the weather. The April rain was making ink dots on their weekend plans to stand outside the Hippodrome movie theater and look cool. They slammed books and made sour faces. I pretended I didn't hear somebody mumble a nasty word.

I slowly worked each problem on my overhead projector, my voice colliding with oral reports in a history class across the hall.

Then the three o'clock bell rang. The last of them shuffled out as one midterm fell to the floor crumpled, a big red *D* rising from the crevices. I thought I heard Gene Lipscomb say, "Get a life, Murdock." I felt my blood pressure rise slightly, but I let it go.

Raindrops pelted against the windows as I turned off the overhead projector. I knew how they felt. It happened every year. At this point it seemed we were all becoming slaves to x and y and every other letter in the alphabet that demanded to be equated with a whole number or a mixed fraction.

I *had* been in their shoes once upon a time. Only science was my pet peeve, not math. Back then I couldn't even bring myself to say xylem and phloem out loud, much less realize their glory in the plant world. And who really wanted to know the inner workings of an earthworm? I'd always said there couldn't be too much in there except some muscle and a nerve mass, and I remember being right.

But math was a different story altogether. My thoughts seemed to line up in marching order when I saw a letter that needed a solution. Solving equations became my passion, and now here I was, cleaning an overhead projector with soggy brown paper towels from the teacher's lounge at Deerfoot High.

I dropped the towels in the metal wastecan beside my desk and started across the hall for my end-of-the-day handwashing ritual. That's when I noticed him leaning against the pale blue cinder block in the hallway, arms folded, need and suspicion overwhelming his tender face. He straightened up and lifted his knapsack from the floor, anticipating a chat. "Thanks for the *A*," he said before I could open my mouth.

"No need to thank me, Henry. You earned it," I smiled, looking down. Although Henry Bohan-

non was a freshman, he was decidedly the runt of the ninety-nine students at Deerfoot High. In fact, he looked like a large sixthgrader. He'd also just received the highest test grade in my algebra class. Always did.

"You miss your bus?" I asked, looking around. The halls were empty.

"Yes, ma'am." He scratched the crown of his head. "Reckon you could give me a ride home?"

"Sure, Henry, I can give you a ride." The image of my Friday bubble bath dissolved into thin air. He watched me lock the classroom, and from the way he dragged himself down the hall beside me, I knew Henry Bohannon was carrying a burden. It crossed my mind that he'd missed the bus on purpose. Deerfoot did have its share of bullies. I'd heard Ron Pete Foley sometimes turned the number three schoolbus into his own private pirate ship.

We were both soaked by the time we scrambled into Jeb's pickup and slammed the doors. As usual I'd left my big black umbrella in a broom closet at home.

"Where do you live, Henry?" I asked, pulling onto the blacktop, my windshield wipers in a frenzy.

"Out on Flatwoods Road." He watched me for a reaction. Just a week ago a man had drowned

near Flatwoods Creek, one of the many tributaries that eventually swirl into the Cumberland River. I knew Flatwoods Road paralleled the part of the creek where the body was found. "You really a private instigator?" said Henry. "I mean . . . uh . . ."

"Investigator," I said. "I've got my own sign, don't I?" All of Deerfoot High had mocked my sign. After my husband Jeb died eighteen months ago, I'd converted his law office into a makeshift detective agency. Unlicensed, of course. My teaching took up most of my time, and for the kind of crime that goes on around Poke County, Tennessee, I only needed my P.I. title and what Jeb called my sixth sense.

Jeb always had me sniffing out odd clues to defend his clients with while he sniffed the flowery perfume of every divorcee in Deerfoot. Then he died of a heart attack. But word travels fast, and after my second paid case, I told myself things had worked out okay.

Henry shrugged, missing my humor, then stared past the windshield as if some kind of impossible mission awaited him on the other side. "I think I need to hire you, Ms. Murdock," he said in a resolved way.

I glanced at him. He was watching me again. No, his pale

blue eyes were earnestly requesting my help, though I guess if I could've foreseen my plight I would've refused altogether.

"What is it, Henry?" We were stuck at a foggy red light on Main Street.

"Promise you won't tell a soul?"

"Well now, Henry, that depends on—"

"Forget it, then," he said, scooting as far away from me as possible.

I made a left turn, barely able to see through the torrents that sounded like continuous thunder on the cab of Jeb's truck. The last thing I wanted to do was alienate Henry Bohannon. Lord knew I'd move Big Cool Mountain and beyond to take away whatever was ailing him. "Okay, I promise," I said.

"You double-dog swear?"

"Is that really necessary, Henry?"

He nodded.

"Okay. Double-dog swear." I cringed. In Deerfoot breaking a double-dog promise is worse than perjury.

He heaved a sigh and sat back, hands in lap. His toes tapped the floorboard nervously. "Okay. This is it. You know Jimbo McBride? He drowned last Thursday in Flatwoods Creek, close to where I live."

It was a rhetorical question.

Everybody in Deerfoot had known Jimbo McBride. Ever since I can remember, Jimbo had taken it upon himself to stand squarely on the corner of Main and First every afternoon, rain or shine, and wave and smile at every human being in sight. Some waved back, some ignored him, some laughed. He never did seem to care what kind of response he received as long as he could get in two or three hours of waving and grinning each day.

Long ago almost everybody figured out that Jimbo was a few cards short of a deck. But I missed his big-toothed smile and his huge arm going back and forth reminding me that small towns were supposed to be friendly. In fact, I thought Jimbo McBride had had the most important job around. "I read about Jimbo in the *Gazette*, Henry. He was fishing, and the creek was up that night from all the rain, and besides that, he'd been . . ."

"Drinkin'?"

"Well, yes," I said.

"You ever drink, Ms. Murdock?"

Yeah, Henry, I wanted to say. I can really guzzle it down after a day of trying to teach ninety-odd nitwits the meaning of the word solve. As a matter of fact, I could use a couple of cold beers

right now, I thought. "No, not much," I said. "You?"

"Nah. Never touch the stuff."

"That's good. So what about Jimbo?"

"I read the paper, too, Ms. Murdock. They said it was an accident, didn't they?" He watched me nod my head slowly as I tried to detect the yellow line through the downpour. "Well, it wasn't," he said. "Jimbo McBride was murdered. Somebody pushed him into that creek, and I want you to find out who did it."

I pulled Jeb's truck over to the side of the road, the rain slackening to a heavy drizzle. I turned my wipers to low and faced Henry. "Now, what makes you think Jimbo was murdered?" I said.

He looked out the passenger window at misty patches of rolling green grass. "I ran into Jimbo that night. He fished a lot in the spring. He was smarter than people thought, Ms. Murdock. He knew just by the feel of the air what temperature the creek water would be. And whether or not the fish'd be stirrin'. That's how he caught all those bass and blue gill when my daddy'd spend all day at Norris Lake and catch nothin'. But Jimbo always threw 'em back. He could handle a hook and a line just fine, Ms. Mur-

dock. And everybody thought he was . . . you know."

"Did you know Jimbo very well, Henry?"

"Some. I'd run into him now and then, 'specially in the fall or spring. He'd be down at the creek fishin' off the bank. Nobody else ever went down to the creek right there. It's kind of hard to find, like a secret hide-out. After supper I always went looking for night crawlers down there. Mom said I could go as long as I was back before eight." He heaved a monumental sigh. "Jimbo gave me a birthday present, Ms. Murdock. That's how this whole mess started, on account of my birthday." His voice cracked a little.

"What happened?" I was nearly whispering. A car swished by, splashing water somewhere behind me.

"On my birthday, April second, I turned fourteen, and it was the first clear night since I don't know when. That night at supper Mom and Jennie, that's my little sister, fixed me a cake with candles and everything. Dad drives a truck, so he was at work. But he left me a present. It was a telescope with its own little suitcase. I'd been askin' for one for ages.

"I went down to the creek that night carrying my telescope and a jar for night crawlers. There's a clearing there where the stars

shine real bright. I hadn't seen Jimbo at the creek since October, but that night he was there, fishin' just a little ways down from the clearing." Henry stared, mesmerized, at the radio knobs in front of him.

"That night the creek was like a tropical island, Ms. Murdock. Moon was high, wind blowin' just right, making ripples on the water but not too much. Jimbo says the fish don't bite in rough water." He faced the window again, his voice waning at this last bit of information. "I told him it was my birthday and that I got a telescope. Me and Jimbo found Leo the Lion that night, and I'm pretty sure we found the Great Bear." I must've looked confused because Henry felt the need to say, "You know the Great Bear? Ursa Major? It's a constellation." I nodded as if stars were my specialty. "Anyway, Jimbo said *he* had a present for me. He took some old keys out of his pocket and handed 'em to me. I didn't want to take Jimbo's keys, but they were small and didn't look too important and he really wanted me to have 'em. He said they'd open a treasure box. I thought he was just being silly, so I took the keys home and put 'em in a drawer with some other junk. Then last Thursday night . . ."

"I'm listening, Henry."

He squeezed his eyes shut

then opened them, giving me that I-dare-you look again. "You swear you won't tell?" he said.

"I told you, I swear." I was on the edge of my seat, feeling lightheaded.

"Okay. Last Thursday after supper I was headed toward the creek with my telescope again. It was another one of them balmy nights, and I figured Jimbo'd be there. I never did get to the creek, though. I was on my usual path through the woods when I heard a man yelling, 'Gimme them gosh-darn keys!' except he didn't say 'gosh-darn.'" Henry arched his eyebrows. We both knew what word to substitute for gosh-darn. "I heard Jimbo say something about how he'd given the keys away and he wasn't an Indian giver. The man kept asking for the keys. First he'd soften up and ask real nice, then he'd start yellin' and cussin' again. I can't stand cussin'," said Henry with a vengeance.

"This is the bad part, Ms. Murdock." He sat up a little; his eyes shot toward me for a half-second. "The man started sayin' mean things about how Jimbo couldn't swim. Then he said if he didn't get the keys Jimbo'd end up in the creek with the rest of them peabraind fish. That's what he said, Ms. Murdock. Peabraind fish. I'll never forget

He sat still, saying nothing for what seemed like an eternity. Then he started up again with a kind of frightened energy that made my eyes moist. "I ran back home to get the keys Jimbo had given me for my birthday, but I couldn't find 'em anywhere and Mom wouldn't let me go back out that night. I was tossin' and turnin' all night, Ms. Murdock. The next day I found Jimbo's keys in Jennie's room. She'd been pretendin' they were her house keys or somethin'. Well, Jimbo wasn't standing on the corner the next day like he usually did. And that night he wasn't at the creek. I went down to find him, to give him the keys back. But I shoulda gone back the night before. I coulda saved his life."

I wanted to shake the truth into him. "No, you could not, Henry Bohannon. Don't be so hard on yourself. You are not to blame, not one bit. Do you hear me?" He was staring blankly past the windshield again. "Have you told this to anybody else?" I asked.

"No. You're the only one who knows and I've sworn you to secrecy, right?"

"But why, Henry? Why didn't you tell your mother? She could've called the sheriff and—"

"And then I'd be on the killer's list. Don't you get it Ms. Murdock? If I told, somebody'd be on

trial for murder, and I'd have to be a witness, the *only* witness. Then I'd be under oath and have to tell the truth about what I heard and the keys and all."

"But, Henry, this man you think killed Jimbo, if you testified you could keep him from hurting somebody else."

"It don't always turn out that way, Ms. Murdock. I can read, you know. And I've seen my share of movies. Sometimes they get the wrong man, and then the real killer comes after the witness. Or sometimes they get the right man, but he gets parole and then comes after the witness. I don't wanna have to move around and change my name the rest of my life. I like it here, and I don't think my family'd want to move either."

So that's why Henry had missed the bus. He wanted me to find Jimbo's murderer without involving himself in any way. It was understandable, although I wondered what kind of books and movies he'd been exposed to lately.

And he didn't seem to have proof that Jimbo had been murdered. But he did have a threat just before the time of death. And there was somebody out there with opportunity and motive. If we found the owner of the keys, we'd find the suspect, but how could we prove he'd

killed Jimbo without Henry's testimony? Henry would have to tell about hearing the threat. It was crucial.

We sat in the truck as I voiced all of this to Henry, who simply said I'd already sworn and besides that he'd saved one hundred and nine dollars he was willing to fork over for my services. I told him I'd take the case in the interests of justice if he would keep the money and wash my overhead projector every other morning until the last day of school.

Before Henry hopped out of Jeb's truck to a worried Mrs. Bohannon waiting on the porch, he dug the birthday keys from his pocket, the keys over which Jimbo McBride had allegedly been murdered. They were thin and gold on a tarnished keychain that bore the letter *Z* inscribed in a circle. I noticed that *D709B* was engraved on one side of both keys. I could tell right away they were too small to be house keys or car keys. Henry said he'd been carrying those cotton-picking keys around for a solid week. Bless his heart. He said he didn't want to chance losing them again.

Behind Jeb's office desk is where the best of my thinking occurs. And it occurred to me on Saturday morning that I had

absolutely no clues and no suspects and that Henry had frozen all of my resources with his gosh-darn double-dog swear policy. I couldn't possibly march into the sheriff's office demanding the Jimbo McBride file and details of the drowning if there were any. If I didn't act friendly and half-answer all the questions they were bound to ask, I'd be under suspicion for investigating or instigating a murder case, which I'd promised not to tell I was doing.

Of course I didn't have to let on who'd hired me, but Deerfoot is a town, not a city, and sooner or later Henry Bohannon would be linked to my investigation. After all, at least three dozen citizens of our thriving community had already spotted me having a heart-to-heart with Henry in Jeb's truck.

I decided then and there I would not approach the sheriff concerning this case. I didn't want Henry even suspected as a witness, much less have a subpoena turn up at his front door.

I leaned over and started digging through a pile of outdated *Deerfoot Gazettes* I'd let pile up on the floor beside Jeb's desk.

It was on the front page of the April eleventh issue, a two inch column in the right corner. "ACCIDENTAL DROWNING: The body of James Brewster McBride was found Friday afternoon at

Brown's Cove near Flatwoods Creek. Two local teenagers reported finding the body . . . fishing line wrapped around left ankle . . . autopsy revealed traces of alcohol . . . had been dead at least eighteen hours . . .

I didn't need to read any more.

I took out one of Jeb's legal pads and started making a profile of the killer. According to Henry, the suspect was a male who obviously knew Jimbo, which didn't tell me much because, like I said, everybody in Deerfoot knew Jimbo. But as Henry told it, this particular male had a temper and knew where Jimbo could be found that particular evening and how to get there. It was possible that he'd followed Jimbo or even tagged along, two buddies going fishing.

And then there were the keys. Obviously, the keys themselves weren't valuable, but they were probably the only set to a lock that opened something of great value to the suspect.

In five seconds I was on the phone with Betty Sue Gallagher at the *Gazette*. She took down every word of the ad I wanted placed in the lost and found section, then informed me that the ad wouldn't run until Monday.

I sat at Jeb's office desk staring at the black rotary phone wondering what danger I was in by printing Jeb's office phone

number for the retrieval of the lost keys. That way the killer could find out easily enough who I was.

But I didn't see that I had a choice in the matter. I wasn't going to print my home number, and and I certainly wasn't going to leave the keys at the *Gazette* office for the killer to pick up. I had a big fish to catch, and one lure to dangle. I never intended to hand over those keys, not to anyone. Not until I found Jimbo's treasure and maybe not even then.

Over my shoulder a blinding sun was breaking through the clouds beyond Big Cool Mountain. I picked up the phone again. "Henry? It's Marcy Murdock."

"Ms. Murdock? Any luck? You haven't told, have you?"

"Of course not, Henry. And no, no luck yet. Why are you whispering?"

"I don't want my mom or Jennie to hear."

"What are you doing today?"

"Worryin' a lot. Why?"

"Because it's not raining any more. I thought I might go down to the creek and look for clues. I need you to show me the way."

"Okay, but I'll have to meet you somewhere. I don't want Mom suspectin' anything."

Just then I heard a muffled

voice say, "Henry, what're you doin' in there?"

"Jeepers," said Henry to me. Then, "Just talkin' to Ray, Mom."

"In the bathroom?" she said.

He started whispering real fast. "Okay, Ms. Murdock? Park at the Line 'n' Bait Shop just before you get to my house. There's a huge field behind there. Walk on a diagonal toward the back of my house until you come to the edge of the woods. There's a rope swing. Meet me in the woods behind the swing in a half hour." He hung up.

I arrived at the Line 'n' Bait Shop at nine thirty-five A.M. wearing my oldest jeans and a nubby wool sweater of Jeb's. The sun was out, but the air was a cool forty-one degrees, according to Jeb's truck radio. I tried to act nonchalant as I walked slowly around the store, then real fast through a field that must've been a mile deep and five miles wide. I finally reached the edge of the woods, looking both ways for a rope swing that was nowhere in sight. I walked leisurely along the trees toward the direction of Henry's house, which I thought I saw the roof of just over a shallow knoll in the field.

Suddenly I heard a "psst! psst!" coming from the woods. Then Henry's slim frame

emerged from behind a clump of skinny poplars. "Back here," he whispered loudly. I joined him as we rustled and crunched through about twenty yards of thick foliage and filtered sunlight, birds atwitter around us.

We'd reached a wide shallow hole scattered with fallen branches and leaves when Henry said, "This is as far as I can go, Ms. Murdock. I have to go babysit Jennie now. Mom's gettin' her hair done this mornin'." His nose was red, and he hadn't even worn a coat, just a grey T-shirt and corduroy pants that were hemmed too short.

He nodded toward the hole. "This here's what I call the moon crater. It's just some kind of pit that's been here forever. Neat, ain't it?" He looked at the crater, grinning.

"It looks like fun," I said, imagining Henry pretending all sorts of things with the wooded terrain. He was still a kid. A kid with a burden I was going to lift if it took me two lifetimes and a day.

His shoulders drooped as he pointed deeper into the woods. "From here, walk straight along this line of black oaks until you get to a campfire. There'll be some burnt wood in a pile with a few sittin' logs around it. Then veer left at about a forty-five degree angle for about half the length of a football field. You'll

come to the clearing. That's when you'll hear the rushin' of the creek water. Just follow your ears. It's not far then. Jimbo used to fish off the big rock to the left. Got it?" He had his hands on his hips.

"Campfire, veer left, half a football field, clearing, big rock. Got it," I said lightheartedly, trying to ease the tension in his face.

"Okay. I gotta get back now. I'll, uh, see ya."

"Wait a minute, Henry. I think it would be best if you didn't go down to the creek by yourself for awhile, at least until we wrap this thing up. Our suspect could surface, and you and I both know he's not a friendly type."

"If you say so." He shrugged.

"Promise?"

"Yeah, okay." He smiled a little, then jogged off behind me.

I followed Henry's directions, feeling lost along the football field, forty-five degree angle part. But finally I made it to the clearing, where the trees were much thinner. I could hear the water rushing loudly downstream. In one minute I was standing in mud and moss on the bank of Flatwoods Creek.

The creek, wide and sparsely overhung with trees, took several crooked turns downstream. Henry was right. It was a beautiful secret hideout, and the

woods were fresher and greener than a truckload of Granny Smith apples. I inhaled the mineral smells of damp sandstone, reminding myself of days when I romped along similar streams with my brother Rex.

I hopped downstream on large stepping stones until I came upon a huge, steep rock that jutted out from the bank. I could picture Jimbo sitting at the top, dangling his feet toward the water and holding a fishing line.

I climbed up on the rock, which rose powerfully above the creek below, and searched every inch around me. If there had been a scuffle on the rock, there wasn't any sign of it. Also, if Jimbo had been drinking that night as the *Gazette* indicated, all bottles and cans had been removed, by the sheriff or the killer. There was no trash in sight.

I stepped back onto the creek bank, slowly edging my way along the trees, scrutinizing the foliage and the ground under my feet. I saw nothing unusual.

Backtracking, I crawled up on the rock again and looked down into the liquid mass below. That's when I saw a glint under Jimbo's rock, a silver object wedged against the underside of the sandstone in the dark earth. I left my muddy footwear on the bank, rolled up my jeans,

and waded, hunched over, into the olive-brown coolness beneath the rock. Three tugs at a small boulder revealed a nest of earthworms wriggling on the muddy rim of a crushed Budweiser can. I shook the creatures free, then shoved the can into my jeans pocket figuring it could belong to Jimbo or Jimbo's killer or anybody who had happened down to the creek in the last five days.

I walked back through the woods toward Jeb's truck, my heartbeat quickening like a newly wound clock. I stood completely still at a rustling sound, then let out a breath at the sight of a plump squirrel scurrying up a runway of oak bark. A female cardinal flitted from tree to tree in the branches above me. All was quiet again except for the rushing of water in the distance.

Back in Jeb's office I stared blankly at the slew of law books and manila folders I had yet to organize. A few divorces, some land lawsuits, wills, even mortgage closings. Personally, Jeb had lived for "the heavy stuff" like burglary or assault cases and penitentiary-bound felon clients.

I pulled on the file cabinet drawer labeled *L-N*, wondering if Jeb had ever had a McBride for a client. The drawer was ei-

ther stuck or locked. I sat on the floor with my head in my hands.

That's when it occurred to me. Two weeks ago I'd mailed a client file out to a Wynona somebody who'd left a three carat diamond heirloom to her daughter in a safe deposit box. I had no idea what such a key would look like, but I figured it was worth a shot. After all, Jimbo himself had connected the keys to a treasure box of some kind.

I headed on foot for Main Street and Deerfoot's one and only First Union Bank. Billy Mike Tuggle, the bank's attorney, had a fancy new office on the second floor. He and Jeb were closer than twin peas in a pod, and in the early years me and Jeb double-dated with Billy Mike and his wife Trixie on occasion.

I sat down in what smelled like a newly upholstered chair while a teenage secretary wearing a year's worth of red lip gloss buzzed me in. I was reading a *Good Housekeeping* article on the perils of high heels when Billy Mike appeared before me wearing a pink tie splattered with navy blue smiley faces. It didn't exactly promote confidence, but then I wasn't there to have my pride stroked.

"Nice tie, Billy Mike," I said in the bubbliest tone I could muster.

"Why, thank you, Marcy," he

grinned, and smoothed his balding scalp, suddenly bearing an uncanny resemblance to the tie imprint. "How's it goin'?" He sounded concerned as he pushed me into a room with green paisley wallpaper. "I know it was hard, losin' Jeb and all." He patted me on the back.

"Yes, it's been the pits, Billy Mike," I lied, faking a sad look.

"There, there, sweetie, thangs'll get better, I know they will." He sat behind a clunky desk and sipped from a porcelain coffee cup sporting the bank's logo, a dollar bill disguised as the American flag.

"I appreciate your sympathy, Billy Mike, but I'm here for a favor." I closed the door behind me and held open my palm.

"Where'd you get those?" He sat up straight, gaping at the keys. "I didn't know Jeb had a safe deposit box. You just find out about this?"

"They're not Jeb's, Billy Mike. I don't know who they belong to, and I need you to find out for me."

"Lord, Marcy. You ain't workin' on a vestigation, are you?"

"Investigation, Billy Mike. And yes, I am."

"Who you workin' for this time? Mayrene Gidley find these in her petunia patch?" He guffawed, taking a giant sip of coffee.

"I'm afraid that's confidential."

He sobered up some. "Come on, Marcy, tell me. You know it'll be in the *Gazette*, just like that other thang."

"Not this time, Billy Mike. This is under the table, understand?"

His face wrinkled into pinchable layers. "Pretty ugly, huh?"

"I've been sworn to secrecy, and like I said, Billy Mike, I need to know the owner of these keys."

"Heck, Marcy, you know I can't do that. I'm a lawyer. I do deeds and property litigations, stuff like that. I don't know nothin' 'bout them safe deposit keys. They prob'ly don't even belong to First Union. Ain't there any other way?"

I dug my fingers into his forearm, positioning my face two inches from his. "No, Billy Mike. This is it. This is the only way. You gonna find out who owns these keys or do I have to call Trixie and tell her about that waitress at the Moose Lodge who taught you how to belly dance on a water bed?"

"That was years ago!" He jerked his arm away, his neck turning rusty. "Your Jeb had a big mouth, you know that, Marcy? He did. I could tell you a few thangs—"

"I know all about Jeb and his philandering ways. Here." I sus-

pended the keys on my right pinky. "I want to know everything."

He grabbed them, studying the engraved particulars. "You wait here." He left the office red-faced, dabbing his forehead with a monogrammed hankie.

In less than five minutes he returned, handing me the keys and three names written on a scrap of yellow paper.

"Jean Scarlett McBride?" I said, trying to read Billy Mike's first chickenscratch.

"Yeah. She died two years ago leaving the contents to her son."

"Jimbo?" His name was second on the list.

Billy Mike nodded. "The poor guy drowned last week. You know the one. Yesterday a man by the name of—"

"Abraham McBride?" The third name.

"Yeah. He's Jimbo's uncle, Jean's brother. Looks like he was the only next of kin. Yesterday he came in and cleaned out the box, the contents of which I do *not* have access to." I mumbled a curseword. Abraham was my suspect. Had to be. And he'd gotten what he wanted. "You sound mighty disappointed," said Billy Mike, wearing a smug little smile.

"I just thought maybe one of the names began with Z, considering the keychain."

He laughed, making me even more uncomfortable. "That keychain was a token from the bank, Marcy, probably given to Miz McBride when she opened her account. Thirty years ago this was Zion Bank. First Union bought 'em out two years after I moved into my first office downstairs."

"I see. Thanks for your help," I said halfheartedly.

As I turned to leave, Billy Mike said, "Oh, Marcy, about the Moose Lodge—"

"Don't worry, Billy Mike." I gave him a quick wink and walked out.

I nearly ran back to Jeb's office, wondering why Abraham McBride had wanted the keys so desperately. If he'd planned to kill Jimbo, therefore procuring the box's contents for himself, he didn't have to present a key to the bank. Safe deposit keys were always kept on hand for abiding customers and beneficiaries.

I rifled Jeb's office phone book for an Abraham McBride, finding none. Then I climbed back into the truck and drove to the county clerk's office in the county seat of Jones Fork, ten miles north. Poke County encompasses dozens of nooks and crannies like Deerfoot, and years ago Jeb had taught me the ropes on finding back-

ground information on would-be criminals. Convictions, arrests, and sometimes traffic violations were on public record for each particular county.

I knew the courthouse was open until noon on Saturday. I had fourteen minutes.

I quickly walked up to the counter where a semi-attractive older secretary with the name-tag LILLIAN BEAN scrutinized me as I asked to use the computer.

"Do I know you?" she said, lowering her black half-glasses.

"Marcy Murdock. Jeb was my husband."

"Oh yes. Jeb." She pursed her lips in a saucy smile that made me wonder. "Rest his ever-lovin' soul. Now, what is it you need, honey?"

"I'd like to use the computer to research a name for a court case. One of Jeb's old cases." I smiled.

"What's the name?" She held a pen ready above a pink pad of paper.

I hesitated. "Abraham McBride."

She scribbled. "I'll git it for you, honey. You ain't allowed back there. Be back in two shakes." She pushed up her glasses and scuttled into a small room behind the counter.

I'd checked my watch nine times before she returned with a printout. There were only two

charges against Abraham McBride in Poke County: reckless driving and public intoxication, both of which carried a one hundred dollar fine, both of which had been paid.

I thanked Ms. Bean, hoping Abraham was a daily reader of the *Deerfoot Gazette*, my gut telling me otherwise.

On Monday at one P.M., my "personal" hour as designated by the Board of Education, I strolled into the library at Deerfoot High. It was on the second floor of the fifty-year-old three story firetrap. Mrs. Hickman, the librarian was slumped behind the wooden counter reading *People* magazine. She didn't even look up as I casually took the *Deerfoot Gazette* from a bookrack in the current events corner. I'd been waiting more than forty-eight hours to read the ad I'd so cleverly placed in the lost and found section. It was word for word just as I had dictated. "Found: two small gold keys, letter Z on key chain. Call 555-0077." I read the ad, all the while feeling funny, like I was fishing on the wrong side of the creek on a blustery day.

I sat numbly at my desk as the three o'clock bell rang. Eager students gushed noisily out the door, emptying the seats in front of me. I saw Henry glance

over his shoulder, reminding me of our pact.

Jeb had never bothered to purchase an answering machine for the law office. He always said a machine like that would generate more business than he had time for, and also, he didn't want to spend an entire Monday feeling pressured to return calls that had been collected during a precious weekend of gambling away a year's pay. Jeb was a hands-on type, and his women friends could attest to it.

I sat behind his pressed pecan veneer desk waiting for the call I knew would never come. Abraham McBride had gotten what he wanted and had no interest in Henry's keys. Not now.

However, I had my puny little plan, just in case. In my mind it was simple. He would call. I would arrange a meeting in a public place, perhaps the post office. I would not make the meeting. He would leave, and I would discreetly follow him, hopefully to a place of employment or home. At least then I would have more to go on, maybe find something more incriminating than Henry's memory.

I looked out Jeb's second story window and swiveled my desk chair around, wondering how long I would wait, wondering how far across the Tennessee

border Abraham McBride had hightailed it.

That was precisely when the phone rang. A split-second before I picked up the receiver, a feeling ran through me, an angle I hadn't anticipated. It was the killer's point of view. I had my plan. And he probably had his.

"Mary Winehart," I answered, dumbfounded at my spontaneous pick of aliases.

"Uh, I think I've got the wrong number, sorry—"

"Henry? Is that you?"

"Ms. Murdock?" He was completely out of breath.

"Sorry, Henry. I was, uh, using an alias. Never mind all that. What's the matter?"

"Ms. Murdock, somebody's down at the creek, lookin' for something. I think it's him. It's a man with white hair, and I think he heard me runnin' back through the woods."

"You went down there alone?"

"Yeah. I had to. I needed to look around by myself in the daylight. I took my daddy's wrench for protection."

"Goodness, Henry. How long ago did you see him?"

"Maybe five minutes. I just now got back home and called you."

"Henry, you stay put, you hear me? I'll take care of this." I hung up the phone before he could argue with me.

It took me eight minutes to grab some essentials, drive to the Line 'n' Bait Shop, and buy a cheap fishing pole. I ran to the edge of the woods where I'd met Henry before and took the path down the line of black oaks to the campfire, then to the clearing, where I could hear the rushing of Flatwoods Creek.

I could see him through the thin grove of poplars. He was staring off into the water from Jimbo's rock, his back toward me showing a head of shaggy white hair. He was wearing some kind of dark blue jumpsuit.

I'd decided a confession was my only hope for justice. And I was itching for a confrontation. "Afternoon," I said walking up behind him. "Catch anything?" I stabbed the fishing pole into the mud.

He looked over his shoulder and turned around, sitting on his heels. I immediately noticed LEON'S AUTO SERVICE embroidered in red on his left chest pocket. Then I noticed his wrinkled, deep-set eyes and sunken cheekbones. His face was suntanned and smeared with black grease. I judged him to be in his mid-fifties or older. "Not fishin' today," he said, trying to smile. He fingered the buttons nervously on his jumpsuit, one of which was missing and replaced with a safety pin. Motor oil

stained his rough hands. His eyes darted all over the ground; then he half stood, jumping from the rock onto the bank. He landed ten feet in front of me. I backed up.

"Looking for something?" I said.

"Not really. Just lookin' around. My nephew used to fish out here. He drowned last week."

"I'm sorry. You, uh, wouldn't be Uncle Abraham, would you?"

"It's Abe. And you are?"

"Marcy Murdock. I sort of knew Jimbo," I said.

He nodded congenially, then shook his head in pity. "His mama died a few years back and left him with nobody. I was workin' at the gas station, and I got my boss to rent Jimbo the little kitchenette above the station there. At least that way I could keep an eye on him at work. I guess he needed somebody to watch over him full-time, though." He sadly jingled some change around in his front pocket. "I best be gettin' back. Hope you catch a few," he said.

He'd taken less than five steps when I said, "I heard you pushed Jimbo into the creek that night."

He swung around and glared at me, swinging short white strands around his face. "Who said that?"

"Did you?" I said.

"Of course not," he yelled. "I'm . . . I couldn't handle Jimbo."

"It would only take one good shove. You said yourself he couldn't swim. And the creek was high that night." I was feeling bolder than Gypsy Rose Lee on a hot summer night.

"Who the hell are you?" He walked quickly toward me. I dropped my fishing pole and pulled out the .38 I'd placed inside the lining pocket of my jacket. Jeb always kept the gun in the glove compartment of the truck, unloaded, and I hadn't taken the time to look for bullets. Abe McBride stopped at the sight of the gun, then folded his arms and looked wistfully upstream.

"I'm the one who found that last beer can you were looking for, the one you left behind the night you shoved Jimbo to his death," I said. "Tell me something, Abe. Was it worth it?"

"Why, you . . ." He gritted his teeth and walked even closer, making two fists close to his sides. I raised the gun. "This is slander. I'll have you sued before—"

"I suppose you couldn't get Jimbo to claim whatever was in that safe deposit box, could you, Abe? So when the creek was high, you decided to go fishing with him, make sure he had an accident."

"It was an accident. I got mad,

shook him a little, and he fell. It was an accident," he said.

"You mean you were here, right here, when he fell in?" I said loudly.

"There was nothin' I could do. I jumped in, tried to save him, you know. He got away from me. The current was swift, too swift."

I stood there pointing my gun, vengeance brewing inside me. Abe McBride was as honest as a used car salesman in a room full of rich, road-hungry juveniles. I kept my voice loud and steady. "Why didn't you run to the nearest house and get help, Abe? Why the heck didn't you report this so-called accident? And why did you want those keys so badly? You didn't need 'em to claim the contents at the bank."

He fidgeted, jingled the change again. "Jimbo showed me the keys but wouldn't let me hold 'em. I thought they might be to a safe deposit box. My sister Jean, she had some stuff, diamond rings, emeralds, all kinds of gems from some guy she'd gone with a long time ago. She died, and nobody ever knew where the jewelry went to. I still don't know where the stuff is. There was nothin' in that box but a letter."

I cocked the gun, praying he wasn't armed. "What kind of letter?"

"It was a damn love letter, for

God's sake. From Jimbo's dad to Jean. Nobody ever knew who his father was. Turns out Jimbo's dad was a politician, a U.S. senator or somethin'. He was married when Jimbo was born and kept Jean Scarlett quiet with all the jewelry." He smirked. "That's all she wanted, a bunch of expensive jewelry she didn't have no use for. Where was she gonna wear that stuff around here, Zeke's Market? Jimbo's dad died years ago," he said abruptly.

Suddenly he lunged toward me, knocking my stiffened arms upward with some kind of karate chop. I was flat on my back when he wrestled the gun from my fists. "Get up!" he ordered, pointing the barrel at my face. I slowly did so, my hands instinctively above my head. Like Henry I'd seen my share of movies. "The sheriff's got his eye on you, Abe," I lied. "You hurt me and you'll be incriminating yourself."

"Maybe you'll disappear, Marcy Murdock. Right before my eyes." He stood firmly and aimed.

I quickly summarized my options. He was now approximately ten feet in front of me, his back to the creek. I was closer to the path to Henry's house. If I stood there within shooting distance, he'd find out the gun wasn't loaded, and then he would

come after me with those god-awful oil-stained hands. And then . . . I shuddered.

My legs worked better than I anticipated. I turned and bolted back to the clearing and up toward the campfire, his heavy boots pounding the earth behind me. In three seconds there was a tremendous clicking noise, and the repetition of a phrase I'd heard only twice before, once in an R-rated fright movie and two years ago when Deerfoot High lost the state football championship.

By then I was well on my way up the line of black oaks with my mind on the moon crater. I looked over my shoulder, still running, and saw Abe McBride on my trail without the gun. He was farther behind than I'd thought, until I tripped at the edge of the crater and fell into a slimy compost of leaves and dead branches. I scrambled, slipping out of the bog with intentions of regaining my stride, but he threw himself in front of me, his hands wrapped around two skinny poplars blocking my path. "Game's over, Murdock," he said in a voice that made the godfather sound like a happy camper. I could hear the far-away rumble of cars on Flatwoods Road. And a rustling sound to my left.

Sheriff Don Earl Keck's uniform was the color of grey-

brown bark, blending nicely with the tree that brushed his hip. He was holding a rifle aimed at Abe McBride. "Put your hands behind your head," he hollered, approaching at a snail's pace.

Abe obliged, reluctantly. "Lord, Marcy, how on earth did you get yourself in *this* predicament?" said the sheriff, his steely eyes on his target.

"I'm afraid that's confidential, Don Earl. How did you know where—"

"Anonymous phone call. Somebody said you were in big trouble out here. Meet me at the office." He pointed with his head and marched Abe McBride off toward Flatwoods Road.

I turned off Jeb's micro-recorder that hung from a brown vinyl belt under my sweater. I wasn't sure how much I'd gotten on tape.

I stood there beside the moon crater and rewound the tiny cassette, playing back the entire conversation. The creek sounded like static in the background, but every word came through.

Of course I would have to testify, but justice would be served, without Henry.

I walked back to Jeb's truck, half expecting Henry to meet me at the edge of the woods. But he wasn't there. That evening I answered my telephone twice to a caller who hung up without so

much as a heavy breath. I knew it was Henry, checking my aliveness.

The three o'clock bell rang like sweet parting music. "Henry?" I yelled across my classroom, rescuing him from the undertow of escaping bodies. He did a backwards duck and spun around, ending up in front of my desk.

"Yeah?" he said hopefully.

"Thanks for making the phone call."

"What phone call?" He tried not to smile.

I smiled big. "You know the one. You were right, Henry. It was him."

"The killer?" he whispered.

I nodded. "The keys belonged to a safe deposit box. The whole thing'll probably turn up in the *Gazette* again real soon. I'll have to testify, but don't worry, you're completely in the clear."

"Oh man. Wow," said Henry, showing a smile I'd never seen before. "That's good. I mean, it's not good, but it's, uh, better, I guess."

"I guess. How about a ride home?"

Henry Bohannon hopped out of Jeb's truck into the sunshine. He loped toward his mother, who was sweeping the front porch while Jennie dallied with a ball and jacks on the walkway. I'd been around teenagers long enough to know that next year,

at fifteen, he would consider himself a man.

I cranked up Jeb's truck radio on the way home. Jimmy Buffet crooned "Margaritaville" out of

my rolled-down windows as I sang my loudest.

Some old guy at the Line 'n' Bait Shop gave me a thumbs up.

SOLUTION TO THE JULY/AUGUST "UNSOLVED":

Earl Illitch cased the bank. Carl Jackson planned to drill the safe.

DAY	HUSBAND	WIFE	VISITED
Monday	Fred Handel	Elsie	furniture store
Tuesday	Andy Kantor	Celia	clothing store
Wednesday	Earl Illitch	Debby	bank
Thursday	Dan Gilson	Betty	grocery store
Friday	Bart Lambert	Faith	candy store
Saturday	Carl Jackson	Alice	hardware store

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the October issue.

Television and newspapers gave it only a brief notice—just another political assassination in a remote little African country. Within the elite circle of those engaged in espionage, however, it became known as the Zatutu Affair.

The tiny nation of Zatutu achieved international recognition as the world's supplier of glowite. Benevolent King Gu-Dwan sold his precious resource to all who wished to buy, and he happily spent his time planning schools, roads, and hospitals for his people.

With rumors of political unrest, however, the five nations requiring glowite for their new technology—Frankia, Gertland, Helgary, Idastan, and Justina—each sent its top secret agent to Zatutu. These spies, known by their code names of A, B, C, D, and E, each traveled under a particular cover: an artist painting native scenes, a banker looking for investments, a contractor hoping to build new homes there, a doctor investigating diseases, and an engineer proposing power dams.

The wealth generated by glowite tempted El-Meenie, the political opponent of the king. After his last failed coup, El-Meenie had gone into hiding, but he remained a continuing threat.

In all their public contacts, the spies were careful not to address one another by their first names of Karl, Larry, Manfred, Noel, and Oliver, or by their last names of Parker, Queen, Rusk, Smith, and Turner.

(1) Manfred, the banker, and the spy from Gertland, code named A, B, and C, anxiously waited in the Tow Mein cafe for D and Mr. Parker to arrive.

(2) At last D and Mr. Parker showed up and started talking with the artist about their homelands of Helgary, Idastan, and Justina.

(3) E, Mr. Smith, and the spy from Frankia, who included Larry,

Noel, and Oliver, proposed that—because of the importance of the mission—all five should pool their knowledge. The other two agreed. They would disperse to different parts of the little country, each coming to the capital only once a week. Each would leave his latest written information at the Tow Mein cafe on a particular day and there read the notices left by others. Since the cafe closed on weekends, they drew lots to determine who would go there on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. As each drew his lot, he departed.

(4) The doctor (who is not Noel) came on Monday and left his note with Mam-bu, the trusted owner of the Tow Mein cafe: "It is predicted that monsoons will soon end the drought, possibly flooding the Krokko River and endangering the glowite mines."

(5) The following day Oliver visited the cafe, reading the note left there on Monday. He left his own information which read: "El-Meenie plans to blow up ships belonging to the countries of C and Karl when they arrive in port to load glowite."

(6) The spy from Helgary came on Wednesday. He was not the contractor. He had important news to leave: "At sunrise next Saturday, El-Meenie will emerge from hiding and lead a parade of his henchmen through the capital, hoping to start another uprising against King Gu-Dwan."

(7) On Thursday the spy, known as A, sneaked into the cafe. He was not posing as the banker. He read the previous messages there carefully, then left his own: "The price of glowite remains steady."

(8) On Friday Mr. Queen came to the cafe and read the message left by Karl. He deposited his own note: "Followers of El-Meenie are spreading false rumors around the countryside, charging that the king is hoarding profits from glowite and that his queen is notoriously unfaithful."

On Saturday, exactly at sunrise, El-Meenie and his gang did enter the capital, just as predicted. One of the five spies adjusted the telescopic sights of his rifle, then very gently squeezed the trigger. El-Meenie dropped dead amid his distraught followers.

By the time the native police assembled, the killer had crossed the Krokko River and disappeared into the Bi-bi Hills.

(9) Three of the remaining spies assembled once again in the Tow Mein cafe. The man from Justina declared, "The killer had a damned good reason to shoot him. He saved the lives of his countrymen loading their ship in the harbor."

Mr. Smith was astonished. He said, "I didn't know anything about *that*."

Mr. Rusk was also perplexed. He stated, "I knew about the ships. But I can't understand how he knew that El-Meenie would make his appearance here just at sunrise this morning."

The man from Justina replied, "I can explain it all later to you two. Just now I suggest we split before the native police begin to suspect something . . ."

Assuming that none of the spies knew more than what he wrote in his note and what he read from others, who was the sniper who wiped out El-Meenie?

See page 90 for the solution to the July/August puzzle.

FICTION

Death Magic

William Beechcroft

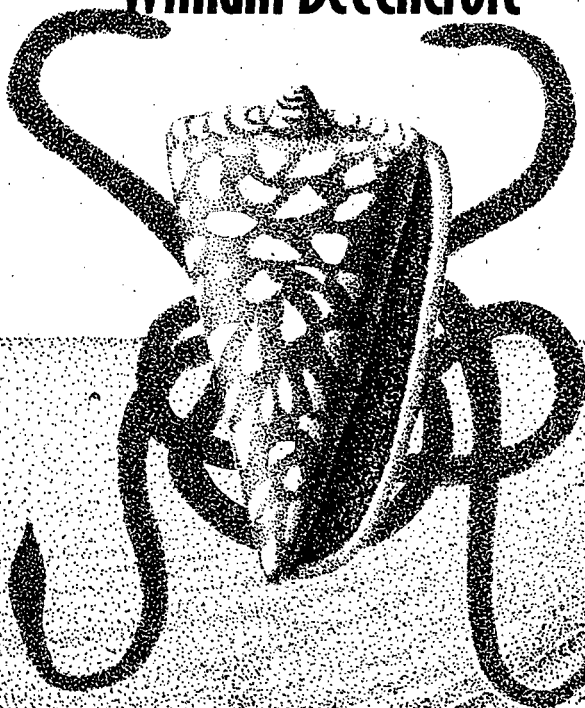


Illustration by David Monette

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/97

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Six of us were aboard the Learjet that arrowed eastward toward the Palaus. Our lean, tall pilot. Our pudgy copilot. And we four passengers from Prime Global Import-Export, Ltd. By now, four hours out of Ho Chi Minh City, I was aware that the other three were in the mood to do me in.

Up front in the chartered jet's spacious cabin crouched Jack McClung, VP-Overseas Operations. The senior exec, he surely carried the most weight—two hundred fifty pounds of it, his permanent flush showing the strain.

On the adjoining seat, nodding loyally at every McClung mutter, perched Tom Sennett, VP-Marketing. He'd no doubt been told more than once that he looked like Errol Flynn, and he constantly diddled his Flynn-like mustache.

The third company man up there, across the aisle from the other two, was Marty Belnap, Director of Public Relations. An unctuous smoothie of middling height, he never spoke without a smile.

Technically, I wasn't a Prime Global employee. I'm Peter Palmer, hired marketing consultant. I was aboard this little excursion to evaluate the company's proposal to establish a Vietnamese branch operation.

And I had come to the conclu-

sion that the time was not yet ripe for such a corporate investment. Which conclusion I had reluctantly hinted at under aggressive questioning earlier in this homeward flight. And which veiled revelation had sent all three of them forward for what now looked like a near panicky heads-together confab.

I had kept my biggest concern to myself. A helpful Vietnamese police captain had come to my hotel room in the dead of night to tell me of an odd coincidence. These same three gents were under quiet investigation for a clandestine business they apparently already had under way there in what used to be Saigon. My informant was almost certain they were absentee entrepreneurs of the lucrative but highly illegal import-export of tiger parts, exploiting a current health craze throughout eastern Asia. The demand for tiger bone, claws, gall, penis, and other body parts already threatened the extinction of the world's tiger population.

If my police captain was reliable, it was possible that my client was being set up as a patsy to subsidize a company office that would be subverted by these three ecological bandits.

No proof, but there seemed to be enough taint at least to advise Prime Global to hold off on its intended Vietnamese expan-

sion. My intimation that I wasn't going to recommend the company's Asian plunge just yet was surely why all three of my fellow passengers now looked as if they'd like to kill me.

Figure of speech, of course.

Our sleek little jet's safe-side cruising range required a stop in the Palaus for refueling. We would overnight there, five hundred miles east of the Philippines and eight degrees north of the equator. Then on to Majuro for another refueling overnight and finally back to Honolulu, Prime Global's home city.

At three fifteen P.M., the Lear's wheels kissed the runway at Palau International Airport—a single macadam strip carved out of the jungle on Babelthuap, the largest of the Palau Islands.

Our pilot had radioed ahead for ground transport to the Palau Pacific Resort. In a van with unyielding springs we jounced out of Babelthuap, rattled across a seemingly endless causeway, then traversed the ramshackle capital island of Koror. At Koror's east end another lengthy causeway with no sign of guardrails took us to Arakebesang Island and the resort.

Which had been built on a Japanese WWII seaplane base hacked out of the tropical forest. A five star hotel; the resort had a big central building designed

along the lines of a Polynesian meetinghouse. Numerous small "cottages" were scattered through the adjacent tropical growth.

"You'll join us for supper," McClung said—ordered—after we had checked in.

I smiled. "Glad to." Always the professional. "Thought I'd take a walk first. See what there is to see."

We stood amid the lobby's wicker waiting for the porky Palauan bellman to trundle our luggage out to the cottages we had been assigned.

"What is there to see?" McClung gestured oceanward. "Sand and water."

"Some of the world's most interesting seashells. A plentiful supply of sea snakes that spend a lot of their time on shore. One of the world's—"

"You been here before?" McClung asked.

"Yep." We followed the bellman out into the steamy afternoon air. It smelled sweetly of frangipani blossoms. "A client of mine treated me to a shelling trip here a couple of years back. Fascinating place. They still believe in magic, and it's—"

McClung shook his head impatiently. "Spare me the travelogue, Palmer." He waved a Palauan guidebook at me. "Bought my own travelogue in the gift shop."

I hadn't been about to go into a magic-of-tropical-nights rapture. There was magic here all right, including the widely practiced "death magic," which specialized in arcane ways to kill people. I'd heard this from my bellman on my previous visit, a wizened old Palauan who was reputed to be a retired—or maybe not so retired—priest of magic. Taking no chances, I had tipped him way beyond average and sensed that I had made a friend.

"Here's my stop," McClung said as the bellman pulled the luggage dolly to the door of one of the cottages. "See you at dinner."

The bellman and I pushed farther into the lush landscaping. On impulse I asked him, "The old man, the old bellman when I was here before—I haven't seen him. He isn't—he hasn't—"

"He retired, sor." Ten yards later the bellman stopped dead on the pathway between cottages. "You are the so generous American! He still speak of you! Oh, I tell him. Welcome, sor!"

Well, at least somebody out here liked me.

The resort's beach faced west, and sunset behind the islands that dotted the seascape was going to be glorious. After I'd settled in a bit, I stepped back into the warm-as-soup afternoon. I ambled southward, then out on

the long finger of sand and shell that the Japanese navy had built as a breakwater for their seaplane anchorage. Aside from encountering a dozen or so black and white sea snakes idling at water's edge, my walk was a relaxing break from the tensions of the moment.

Said tensions, though, set in all over again at dinner. Tonight's feature was Mongolian buffet. McClung, Sennett, and I opted for that. But Belnap, ever the extrovert, ordered fruit bat soup.

"Belnap," I said, "I'm not sure you'll—"

He cut me off with his phony grin. "You squares are afraid of adventure."

His grin faded when in came his big bowl of clear, quite evil-smelling soup. "Christ!" he exploded. "What's that floating in it?"

"The bat, sor," said our soft-spoken Micronesian waitress.

What I'd tried to tell him was that fruit bat soup, a Palauan specialty, was exactly that—served with the entire bat afloat therein. Palauan fruit bats are not bitesized little fellows. They're big guys with foxlike heads and impressive wingspans. This one looked to be almost Piper Cub class.

The soup went back in a hurry. Belnap, for once considerably subdued, settled for the buffet.

Jack McClung, though, was as assertive as ever. "Let's review the situation, Palmer," he suggested with just a hint of strain in his basso profundo. "Your report, we gather, is not going to be exactly a thousand percent for the expansion. If that's an accurate assessment, might you tell us why?"

I paused while the waitress refilled our iced tea glasses.

"Vietnam is a Communist state. The government's attitude toward private enterprise is unclear. There are less risky possibilities elsewhere," I told him. And you three sons of bitches appear to be already running by remote control an illegal and revolting racket there. I didn't tell him that. But I wondered if they had somehow heard that I'd heard. Unsubstantiated rumor but why risk my client's reputation?

The rest of the meal's conversation was sparse and cool. Evidently too cool for Belnap. Or he was suffering fruit bat soup flashbacks. He excused himself before dessert and walked out into the dusk.

Then McClung had at me again.

"After investing major money in this little junket, Palmer, the company is not going to be delighted with a negative report."

Ever the obedient puppet, Sennett nodded, fingered his lip

decor. "You're aware that the CEO himself proposed the Viet expansion?" he tossed at me.

"Look, Sennett, I don't care whose pet project it is. I would be one lousy consultant if I didn't call it like I see it. That's what Prime Global hired me for."

We went on in that mode for nearly another hour. Thrust and parry with neither side budging a centimeter. I finally had enough.

"Goodnight, gentlemen," I said in the middle of a McClung rebuttal to one of my buttals, and I stomped out into the darkness.

In my isolated cottage room I forced myself to dash off a postcard to my wife back in L.A. Couldn't concentrate. Left it on the table half written. Took a shower, pulled on my pajamas. Climbed into bed. Reached for the bed lamp—

My feet had found something. A tube of cool, yielding plastic?

Then it moved.

No one has ever leaped out of bed faster. I tore back the blanket and sheet. Stood staring—shivering.

And not because of the air conditioning.

It was about thirty inches long, with black and white bands back to its flattened tail. A sea snake—a banded laticauda. Tiny fangs, I knew, but their

venom was more potent than a cobra's.

I'm no snake handler, but I stripped off the pillowcase, wadded it in my hands like a crude glove, grabbed the snake behind its head, and tossed it out the door.

Then I checked every inch of that room, got back into bed, and spent the rest of the night staring at the ceiling—with the light on. Like a kid who'd just had the scare of his life.

Sea snakes don't crawl into hotel beds. Somebody had put it there. I was sure I knew who, but where was any proof?

What a great spot to be in.

The three of them were at breakfast when I walked into the dining room. Were those guilty expressions of surprise at my being alive—or relatively innocent glares of continued antipathy toward my forthcoming report? I barely nodded at the triumvirate seated at the window and breakfasted alone at a secluded table far removed.

As they were leaving, Sennett veered over to me. "Takeoff will be at two P.M." He stroked his mustache. "Ah . . ."

"Yes?"

"Nothing, Palmer." And he joined the others.

Surely a prank-loving Palauan hadn't bribed one of the housekeepers to let him into my

room to plant the deadly laticauda in my bed. Who else but my corporate clientele in an evil little conspiracy of which I had not one shred of proof? And I wasn't about to call in the Arakebesang chief of police to tie me up in international political convolutions. There was no love of Americans here. During their WWII occupation, the Japanese had built a serviceable infrastructure for the Palauans. Then in 1944 we arrived and blew much of it to hell.

Maybe a quiet walk would help me organize my jumbled thoughts. I wandered out on the beach again. The sun was dazzling, the air warm and soft as only tropical air can be. The edge of the Philippine Sea lapped peacefully at the shoreline. Maybe I was totally wrong about all this. Maybe the snake somehow . . .

A distant dot had grown into PR Director Marty Belnap, his smile back in place. He was casually flipping something into the air and catching it, like a playful kid. I nodded, barely. The American equivalent of the Japanese mini-bow to one unworthy of a deeper dip. Instinct told me that this fatuously grinning young exec was megamiles from trustworthy. But again, not a whiff of proof.

He stopped and held out a nice big seashell.

Cone-shaped, a beautiful thing like ebony china overlaid with a pattern of arrowhead-shaped white splotches. *Conus marmoreus*, I recalled from my shelling trip here. The Marbled Cone.

"A real honey," Belnap crowed. "And still alive. You can see the meat in there."

I hesitated, then my conscience prodded me. "Let me tell you something about—"

"Ought to find yourself one for Mitzi."

"Belnap, listen to me, will you. That cone—"

"See you at takeoff, Palmer." He tossed the shell into the air again, caught it, and trotted on down the beach.

"Belnap!" I called after him. "You'd better not—"

Then it hit me. Mitzi, he'd said! Nobody in the world but me and wife Michelle herself knew about my pet name for her. How in hell had Marty Belnap known—

The postcard I had left unfinished in my room! Lying on the table under the light I'd left on. The nosy bastard had read it on his way to the bed with the sea snake he'd so craftily picked up on the beach after dinner, while the other two had stalled me in the dining room. As I was sure McClung's guidebook had told him, the laticauda was a placid snake to handle. Kids here even

played with it. The banded laticauda was people-friendly. Unless it was molested, like having a foot bang down on it in my bed.

Belnap, you son of a bitch!

I started after him. Then an odd feeling swept over me. I heard my heart thumping. Like a drum, muffled by distance. My legs felt heavy as iron. I stopped. And that made me a son of a bitch, too. Then I shook off the alien feeling and turned to walk the other way.

The Learjet didn't take off that afternoon. It didn't take off until twenty-four hours later. When it did, there were only three passengers aboard: Jack McClung, Tom Sennett, and Marty Belnap. Two of them were no doubt sweating over what to report to Prime Global's higher brass. Marty Belnap surely wasn't saying anything because he was in the coffin secured at the rear of the cabin.

The Marbled Cone is one of the most appealing and one of the deadliest of the cone shell family. It has an extendable proboscis with a harpoonlike tooth on its tip and a supply of paralyzing venom. There is no specific antivenin for cone shell stings. After coma comes cardiac arrest.

Apparently Belnap's cone had gotten tired of the rough treatment and zapped him. Belnap

had made it back to his room but died on the bed.

Before they took off in the Lear, I shook hands with the two surviving execs, muttered appropriate sympathies, then boarded the next available Continental shuttle to Guam. Damned if I was going to finish this trip aboard a plane with those two murderous co-conspirators.

Had I, the intended victim, become in fact the murderer in our little group? Perhaps, though a highpriced defense team could surely produce a verdict of reasonable doubt.

Someday, though, if you really press me, I might tell you about an old bellman I knew. The rumor was that he had "all-seeing eyes" and was no amateur at Palauan death magic.

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• ATOSSA

Paul G.
Reeve

OK

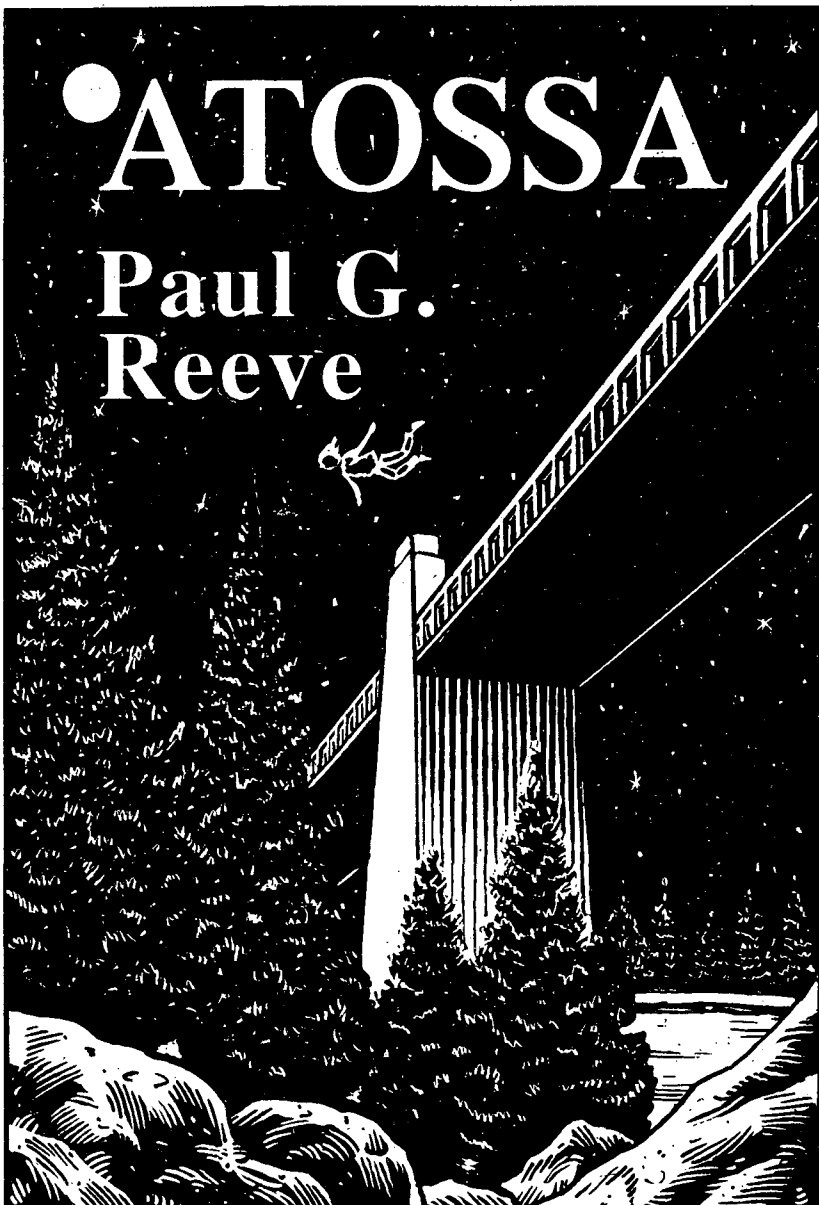


Illustration by Dan Krovatin

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Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 9/97.

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Silhouetted against the flat blue of a late spring sky, the dark figure stretched out with arms spread wide. Growing larger, closer, blurring. Then against the grass, legs twisted crazily, he lay amid cherry red specks that sparkled in the too-bright day. Red froth blew fitfully from his nose. Alive!

I awoke sweating, thrust bolt upright by the force of memory—this all but forgotten scene of some years past.

Suicide. Not an infrequent occurrence, I am told, in some of the large, impersonal universities. But this scene that was imprinted indelibly in the recesses of my mind was the first instance in which I was closely enough involved to feel the impact, the reality of it. When I was an undergraduate, a boy in my dorm took the plunge from one of the upper stories. I saw it happen. He lingered horribly for days, faded, and finally died.

But now his death was back to haunt me because just yesterday evening I had learned that one of my students had made her exit from this world from a railroad trestle outside town.

I swung my legs off the bed, still in an early morning fuzz, and padded barefoot to the kitchen to make a cup of instant coffee. Why must they always jump, I thought. As though I had endless experience with undergraduate suicides.

I had virtually no experience and was not a psychologist, I told myself, so I should stop asking myself stupid questions. I was—in fact, am—an English professor. The girl had been in my English literature survey course.

An attractive girl, perhaps a little older than the usual run of sophomores in the class. A bit careworn but the better settled for it. Sadder but wiser, I guessed. Not at all such a one as I would have picked to take leave of a train trestle in the middle of a spring afternoon.

I sat by my kitchen window watching the mimosa unfold its leaves in the gathering sunlight. I drank my coffee and tried not to think morbid thoughts. The day was off to a bad start.

I picked my way uneasily through my morning lecture schedule. There was a sort of sensation that seemed to ripple through the groups of students as they came and went from the class and a general restlessness during the lectures. News and a widening current of rumor about the tragedy were coursing through the student body. Tragedy in the journalistic, not the literary, sense.

After the two morning classes I decided to forgo a visit to my office and go instead to the student union for yet another cup of cof-



fee. There I saw George Boudreaux, professor of French, who waved a pink, pudgy hand signaling that I should join him.

"Hello, George," I said, pulling up a chair and inadvertently sloshing coffee on the table.

"Careful. I suppose you've heard about that student, Jan Garrett

"Yes. She was in my survey course. I heard about it yesterday."

"I've been sitting here most of the morning. Quite a buzz about it. Apparently she didn't have many friends. Quiet sort. Kept to herself. Naturally that means all the more talk. The less known, the more speculation."

"What sort of speculation? I thought she simply trotted off the edge of a trestle."

"That could hardly be simple. 'There is only one serious philosophical problem,' " said George, donning his pedagogical air, "and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy."

"If you insist on quoting Camus at this hour of the day, you could at least do it in French."

"Odious language of my birth and profession." He exaggerated. He was Cajun. "And besides, neither French nor Camus has really much to do with it. The affair has put me in a philosophical mood."

"What about the speculation you mentioned?"

"Hints of foul play. The sort of thing you would expect from our television-reared undergraduates. Apparently there was no vehicle near the scene or anything to indicate how she got there."

"She could have hitchhiked, I suppose, or hopped a freight train for that matter."

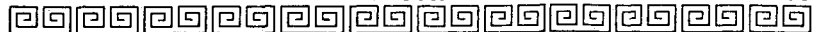
"Elementary, my dear Watson."

"The police don't suspect anything, do they?"

"No. Oh, I've also overheard the theory that she was pregnant and that's why she did it. One version of that theory holds that the father was a faculty member. You may even be a candidate."

"Mmm. I can't accept that role. I'm engaged right now as one of the principals of another scandal, involving your student Mlle. Addison."

"True. But it's not so meaty a role. In fact, it hardly counts as a scandal by comparison. After all, Miss Addison is a graduate student, almost your contemporary, is unmarried, and, to the best of my knowledge, is neither pregnant nor rumored to be. Your pur-



ported scandalous liaison with her is no different from anything most of the students are involved in."

I finished my coffee. "I've got to go. There's work to do."

"Don't rush. Have another cup. On me."

"No. I've been putting off work long enough. I've got to get on with my book, and I've got bales of papers to grade. Ciao."

"Ciao. Lovely language, Italian. Should have studied it."

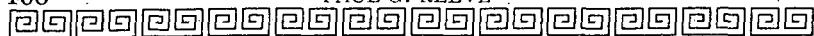
George, George. The only French professor in the business who hates the language. I urged my way through a gaggle of students and felt as though all eyes turned on me. Damn George. His rumor-mongering was making me paranoid.

I pushed out into the midday sun. Another cloudless day, warm and indifferent, perversely failing to match my still rather grey mood. I forced myself to slow my pace. Hands in pockets, I ambled toward my office. The air was still, and only an occasional student lounged here and there. Soon the class hour would be up, and the scene would spring to life. Inadvertently my pace quickened. It is so easy to fall into the custom of always being late for something. Once that happens, one can never again enjoy walking without making a conscious effort to restrain oneself.

I climbed the narrow back steps of the mossy old building that housed the offices of the English Department and stopped a moment inside, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the dim light of the hallway. Then I noticed the wall of pigeonholes at the end of the hall. There was something in my box, a letter and an overdue paper of one of my students. I collected them and went to my office.

The letter was from my editor commenting on the third chapter of my book, about which we had maintained a running discussion. The book was a revision of my Ph.D. dissertation on the Scriblerus Club. I began composing a response in my head, setting aside her pages and turning to the student's paper. I was drawn up short. The cover sheet of the paper said: "An Analysis of Pope's 'Epistle to a Lady' by Jan Garrett." The dead girl. Odd. I had a compelling urge to read it, right then, but I had already resolved to go to the library. I had promised myself that I would have the book ready for the press by the fall. Discipline.

It was no good. I couldn't concentrate. The library was too warm as usual and together with my fitful sleep of the night before left me sluggish and dull. After a little more than an hour's effort I gave up and returned to my office, surly and frustrated.



I had many other papers to read and grade that were more pressing, but since the day seemed almost a total loss anyhow, I decided (out of morbid curiosity?) to read the dead girl's.

It was not a particularly remarkable piece of work. Like most students' papers, it was far too subjective, attempting to apply the poem to her world and her thoughts rather than to draw Pope's world from it. She opened by making some general comments on theme and structure, touching uncertainly on prosody and imagery. I made a mental note to do a lecture on the mechanics of poetry. Most students seemed to have a weak grasp of the technical terminology.

She began by dealing with the substance of the poem in a radical feminist tone. She decried Pope's "sexism" and his stereotyping of women. Fuel for feminist rage abounds in the poem, beginning with the first couplet:

*Nothing so true as what you once let fall,
"Most women have no Characters at all."*

But she could not sustain her anger. She began to become interested in some of Pope's women. It was easy enough for her to denounce the caricatures of the flighty Papillia or the posturing Narcissa, but Flavia took her by surprise:

*Flavia's a Wit, has too much sense to Pray;
To Toast our wants and wishes, is her way;
Nor asks of God, but of her Stars, to give
The mighty blessing, "while we live, to live."*

"Here," she said, "Pope has drawn the first portrait that seems real. She has given up religion for astrology, which is no more satisfying. She is quick to take up any fad, too clever to learn from the experience of others, consciously trying to be different but telling herself that she is only doing her own thing. I have known people like Flavia."

Weak. She was rambling. But the sketch of Flavia disturbed her. Perhaps she saw something of herself in Flavia.

After another paragraph on male chauvinism she again revealed that Pope had got to her, this time with "great Atossa":

*Who, with herself, or others, from her birth
Finds all her life one warfare upon earth . . .*



Maybe George was right. Maybe it is television that does it. You assign a critical analysis of a work of literature, and what do you get? Barometric readings from the ego and the id. She made it quite clear that she sometimes saw in herself some of the qualities of Atossa, "The wisest Fool much Time ever made."

*Her every turn with Violence pursu'd
Nor more a storm her Hate than Gratitude;
To that each Passion turns, or soon or late;
Love, if it makes her yield, must make her hate . . .*

Ordinarily this paper, which seemed only a thinly disguised self-appraisal, would have made me scream with boredom. But events had transformed it into an item of great interest. The English paper from beyond the veil. An unusual document. She was apparently displeased with herself to some extent, but I didn't think she felt her faults were insurmountable. She could recognize them, anyway. Hazarding a guess, not altogether supported by the evidence, I would have said that she was trying to straighten out her life. Getting her head together, she might have put it.

I leaned back in my chair, filling and lighting the pipe I sometimes affected. What else, I wondered. Oh Lord! I tossed the pipe across the desk into the ashtray, scattering sparks and ashes in a miniature fireworks display. Of course. *She didn't commit suicide!* The mere fact that I had the paper suggested that. Who, with the conscious intention of doing herself away, would, on the very afternoon of her planned demise, trouble to complete and turn in an overdue English paper?

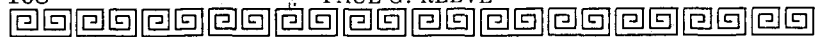
Only two options were open: accident or murder. And what would she have been doing out there by herself fooling around on a railroad trestle? Enjoying the view? Accident didn't seem very likely.

I was absently sweeping together the scattered ashes from my pipe, trying to think through the scene as it must have been at the railroad trestle, but I couldn't picture the hypothetical murder. I felt that I understood it all, but I couldn't conjure one concrete thought about it. Was she thrown or pushed? Was she dead before the fall, or had the fall killed her?

"My god, what a scowl."

I started. It was JoAnne. Mlle. Addison. "Jesus, Jo, do you always pad around sneaking up on people?"

"My subtle nature, I guess. If I had known you were out of sorts, I



would have been perfectly content to leave you alone. George said he saw you this morning, but nobody's seen you since. I couldn't imagine that you were working so hard that you skipped lunch."

"That's a failure of imagination—but in fact I haven't been working very hard. I haven't even skipped lunch—officially, yet. I'm just not in a very sociable frame of mind."

"Sorry. Maybe I'd better check with you some other day."

"No. It's all right. Don't let me scare you off," I said, straightening my back and trying to appear and to feel less forbidding.

"It's the middle of the afternoon. You could probably use a beer and a bite to eat. Let's go over to Archie's." Archie's is a tavern near the campus, a student hangout.

We walked across the campus under a green canopy of elm and oak. There was a slight breeze and a bustle of students here and there. Altogether too idyllic a scene for those chaotic days of struggle and alarm in the academy. A single shaggy student, however, was defacing trees in the distance with political posters to reaffirm my confidence in the undergraduate commitment to Truth, Justice, Equality, or whatever it was that week.

"You've got something on your mind," Jo said. "Are you going to tell me or should I ask?"

"Neither. We'll talk about it when we get to Archie's." We walked in silence at a moderate but gently quickening pace.

It was dark and cool in the tavern, like a cave. The warmth of the day outside and the brisk walk made the tall glass of draught beer the more inviting. I downed half of it without saying a word.

"Okay, Jo, you must be slipping. Read my mind. What am I thinking about?"

"That doesn't take ESP. I've already had a broad hint from George. It's Jan Garrett. Right?"

"Right. And you are going to be my sounding board for a moment. To make sure that my imagination is not running wildly away with me. This morning George recounted to me some of the rumblings in the student body about the suicide. Suspicions of foul play, that sort of thing. All of which George waved off as the product of a steady diet of television from the earliest years. Now I'm not sure." I told her about the dead girl's paper and my impressions.

"That's a sound enough basis for speculation," she said. "I can't see her turning in a paper if she was going to throw herself off a bridge the same afternoon."



"Well, I had better pass the paper along to the police. George seemed to think that they were prepared to close the matter."

"Was there a suicide note?"

"I haven't heard any mention of one."

"Well, surely some of her friends have been questioned."

"I don't know. According to George, she was standoffish, didn't have any close friends."

"That's not right."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she used to. She was a fairly sociable sort when we were freshmen."

"She was in your class? I didn't know she was that old."

"Thanks. She dropped out during our sophomore year. That was five years ago. She had a bundle of problems, which, as one of her suitemates in the dorm, I heard about in grisly detail. Parents in the midst of a loud and ugly divorce, and her own rocky love life. She had been carrying on since freshman year with Zan Parker. He was a senior, and his family didn't approve of her. It was the maddest hot and cold running love affair you could imagine. And frankly, Jan made a lot of her own problems. Some people just have to live in a soap opera. She manipulated Zan mercilessly, and the poor guy already had his father trying to run his life. Anyhow, the affair ended—and Jan dropped out—when Zan married a debutante, who was more to his father's liking and who turned out to be slightly pregnant. He's still here. Or actually he's here again. In law school."

"Were they still seeing each other?" I asked, finishing off my beer and signaling for another.

"If they were, it was a much better kept secret than before. I talked to Jan a couple of times after she came back, and she never mentioned Zan. But it's possible." She twisted a lock of hair about her index finger. "You know, Zan is single now. In fact, I heard that his brush with divorce court is what inspired him to go to law school."

"It certainly pays better than English or French literature."

"Oh, that wouldn't have been a consideration for Zan. He comes from money. Graduated right into a vice presidency in his daddy's business. That may sound nice, but it was truly sordid. His father is the domineering sort. Zan couldn't order breakfast without detailed advice and instructions from the old man."

"Well, going to law school might be a way for him to get out from



under daddy's thumb. And don't tell me that money wasn't a consideration for him. He probably watched half of what he had walk out the door with his first wife. That might make you think about going to law school just to protect yourself in the future. It might also make you cautious about getting involved again with an old flame . . ."

"Ha! For a supposedly serious student of literature, you really don't know nearly enough about human nature."

After lunch I went back to the office and called the police to see if they would be interested in knowing about Jan Garrett's late paper. My call was referred to a homicide detective named Sergeant Allen.

"Homicide?" I asked.

"Suicides are routinely investigated by the homicide division," Allen explained. "What can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm Jan Garrett's English professor, and a rather peculiar thing has happened. I received a late essay from her . . ."

"And what was peculiar about that? Did she usually turn in assignments on time?" The sarcasm wasn't quite thick enough to cut with a knife, but you could dish it up with a slotted spoon.

"No. But I should have thought that one of the attractions of committing suicide was that you needn't finish your class assignments."

"Some people are just tidier than others. They don't like to leave any loose ends. Was there anything in the essay we should know about?"

"I don't know. Are you interested in Alexander Pope?"

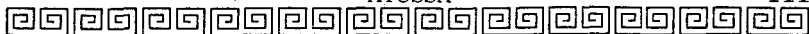
"Not unless he threw her off the trestle." *That* was thick enough to cut with a knife. "Sorry, professor," he sighed. "I'm very busy at the moment, and when I start feeling hassled, I act like a smartass. Tell me, when did you get the paper?"

"It must have been delivered yesterday afternoon. I found it in my box this morning."

"Now, that is kind of interesting. Hang onto it, will you? I'll stop by this afternoon or tomorrow and take a look at it." Apparently Sergeant Allen wasn't especially interested in the essay. All that mattered to him was when it fell into my hands.

I turned to the essay again and read it more carefully. The concluding paragraph practically jumped off the page:

To these observations on the folly of womankind may be compared similar sentiments on that of mankind in



"Sober Advice." The parallels, at any rate, are striking and suggest a certain continuity of design as well as theme. Pope has not shifted ground in "Sober Advice" but intensified what he was already about, thematically in general and procedurally in aspects of "To a Lady."

Why do they do it? The vocabulary and sentence structure were all wrong. Moreover, "Sober Advice" was not even assigned reading in the class. Jan Garrett had clearly lifted this paragraph from some published source and had not given credit. Plagiarism.

And she was so guilt-ridden that she went and threw herself off a train trestle? Not likely. There weren't any other instances of obvious plagiarism in the essay. So maybe she was looking for a quick way to end the paper and turn it in, since it was late already. Perhaps she had something pressing to attend to. Suicide? Not likely.

The plagiarism was moot. Jan Garrett could not be brought to account for it now. Nevertheless, I decided to try to discover where the stolen passage came from as I often did in such cases. I went to the library.

To find a single paragraph of fifty or sixty words among the millions of words written about Alexander Pope may seem like looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack, but some factors narrowed the field appreciably. Most sophomores do not go to a lot of trouble to find their sources. Often they resort to study guides like Cliffs Notes. I didn't think there was a Cliffs Notes for Pope's "Epistle to a Lady," and besides, the reference to "Sober Advice" suggested that it, not the "Epistle," was the subject of the paragraph.

The full title of "Sober Advice" is "Sober Advice from Horace," and it is one of Pope's many imitations of the Roman poet. So the passage probably came from something about Pope and classical literature, and she probably found it in a book, since sophomores don't generally go digging in the professional journals.

There was still a lot to look through. The eighteenth century was the neoclassical period, the Augustan Age, and Pope was its Horace. Nevertheless, "Sober Advice" was not one of Pope's best efforts, and not as much has been written about it as about some of the other Horatian imitations.

I began by looking through the card catalogue for books on Pope and classical literature and found a few likely items. I went up to the stacks to look them over. The first couple were dead ends, but finally I found it. *Something Like Horace: Studies in the Art and Al-*



lusion of Pope's *Horatian Satires* by John M. Aden. The paragraph was on page fifty-nine. There was a slip of paper marking the page, and the paragraph was highlighted in light green.

I looked at the slip of paper. There were several library call numbers jotted on it, including the one for the book I was holding. I turned the paper over. There was a note on the back: "Alex P. Centennial Park. Band shell. 1:00." There was no date on the note. I looked in the back of the book. The most recent due date was three days before. On my way out of the library I checked with the librarian and found that the book had been returned on time. That established what textual scholars call a *terminus ad quem* for the date of the note; the latest possible date, assuming that she had turned the book in with the note tucked inside.

So three days ago she had an appointment in Centennial Park, a park near the campus, but who was Alex P.? It looked like a note to meet somebody at the band shell in the park, but who? Not Alexander Pope, certainly. Amazing how dense an ordinarily intelligent person can be. When your mind is on the wrong track, you can't see what's right before your eyes; as JoAnne gleefully pointed out to me that evening.

"Alex P.?" she guffawed. "Alexander Parker! Zan!"

"Oh."

"Don't feel bad. It's not that obvious, especially if you're up to your ears in Pope research."

"So she saw Parker that afternoon. And then what happened? He threw her off the bridge?"

"Oh, I don't think so. He never struck me as the violent type."

"He never struck you because you weren't his girlfriend. Which of us was it that doesn't understand human nature?"

Sergeant Allen hadn't been very interested the first time I had talked to him, and I wasn't eager to talk to him again. But the next morning I called to let him know about the note I had found.

"A note in a library book?" he asked. "Did it have her name on it?"

"No," I said, and went on to explain how I had found the note.

"I'd like to see that. Could you bring it to my office?"

"Well, I have a class in twenty minutes . . ."

"Never mind. I'm gonna be out your way this afternoon. Where's your office?"

"Old Central. It's near . . ."



"I know where it is. Thanks." And he hung up. Great, I thought, now I'll have to hang around the office all afternoon until he decides to drop by.

After my class I went back to the office and settled in behind my desk to try to make some progress through the stacks of student papers that I had let slide for too long. Around one o'clock I was beginning to think I might finish grading this set of essays before I was eligible for Social Security. I went down the hall to fetch a cup of coffee and check my mail.

When I returned, a tall slender black man, with close-cropped salt-and-pepper hair and a much nicer suit than I had ever owned, was idly examining my bookshelves.

"Sergeant Allen?" He turned and shook my hand with a firm grip and pleasant smile that belied his brusque and sarcastic manner on the telephone.

"I gather you are a specialist in Restoration and eighteenth century literature," he said, gesturing toward the books.

I nodded.

"I never liked that stuff. The poetry is too prosaic and the prose is too . . ."

"Mannered?" I suggested.

"No. Boring."

"Were you an English major, sergeant?"

"Sociology," he said, "but I had a minor in English."

"Oh? What do you like?"

"Modern American. But I didn't come here for a literary chat."

You started it, I thought, but I didn't say anything. I went over to my desk to set down my coffee and mail and get Jan Garrett's essay and note.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" I asked, handing him the literary remains of Jan Garrett.

"No, thanks." He directed his attention to the note. "Did you look at any of these other books?" he asked, pointing to the call numbers on the note.

"No." And I mentally kicked myself. I had found what I was looking for, the plagiarized paragraph, but if there was a slip of paper in one book there might have been something in one of the others as well.

But Allen was thinking of something else. He pointed to one of the call numbers on the list. "What's this?" he asked. Unlike all the other numbers beginning with the prefix *P*, indicating language and

literature in the Library of Congress catalogue system, it began with a K.

"I don't know," I said, "but it's easy enough to find out." I rummaged through my desk drawer to find the brochure the library put out explaining the Library of Congress system. Most people my age had cut our teeth on the Dewey decimal system. But now most research libraries used the LC. According to the brochure, K was the classification for law.

"So," Allen mused. "That seems to bring us back to Parker, the law student."

Allen went off to find Parker, and I gathered my research notes to spend the rest of the afternoon in the library. Rather than going directly to my carrel, however, and doing some productive work, I stopped at the card catalogue and looked up the law book that was in Jan Garrett's notes. It was *Wills and Trusts in a Nutshell* by Robert L. Mennell. Was she doing some research for Parker or for herself? Why would she want to know about wills and trusts? Was Parker the beneficiary of a trust? How would that affect Jan?

According to the card catalogue, the book wasn't in the main library, but in the law library, and I wasn't about to trudge across campus to look it up. I went to my carrel and settled in with my editor's notes on chapter three.

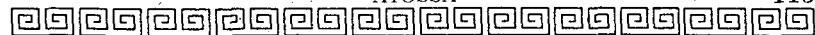
For once I actually got some work done. By about six o'clock I had revised the chapter to include most of my editor's suggestions and had composed a draft of a letter to explain why the rest of the suggestions were not acceptable. I fleetingly thought about going back to the office to type it all up but decided instead to drop in at Archie's for a beer and a bite to eat. Archie's was close to the library, and its siren song had wrecked many a scholarly career.

I stood just inside the entrance to the cool, dark tavern and surveyed the room. At a booth toward the back, JoAnne was sitting with George Boudreaux. I waved to them and walked over to the booth. "Is this a private conference or can anyone join in?" I asked.

"The executive session is over," George announced. "Have a seat. We were just critiquing Mlle. Addison's prospectus for her thesis." JoAnne was planning to write a thesis on Denis Diderot, and George was her thesis director.

"Where have you been?" Jo asked. "Zan Parker was just here looking for you."

"Parker? He doesn't even know me."



"The police apparently told him that you had information that he had seen Jan just before she died."

"Oh? How did he feel about that?"

"Annoyed. I tried to calm him down."

"Not very successfully," George added.

"Great," I said. "I guess I should stay away from railroad trestles." I took a sip of JoAnne's beer.

"Hey," she said, "get your own."

I thought for a moment. "How did he know to ask you where I was?" I asked JoAnne.

"You forget," she said. "I knew him and Jan from our undergraduate days. But because he came to me, we can infer an interesting piece of gossip. Zan had been seeing Jan."

"How do we infer that?" I asked.

"George, how did a witty and intelligent woman like me get tangled up with a lump like this?"

"L'esprit est toujours la dupe du coeur," George said. I looked at him quizzically.

"La Rochefoucauld," Jo said. "The mind is always the dupe of the heart."

"Oh? And what about your gossipmongering inference?"

"Well, Jan is the common denominator. She was in your class, she knew me, she surely had seen you with me. So, if Zan knew that you and I are an item, he must have heard it from Jan. Therefore, he was seeing her. Q.E.D."

He could have heard about me and Jo from any number of sources in the university rumor mill, I thought. But practically speaking, the law school was a world of its own, and Jan or some other undergraduate was Parker's most likely source of information about the university outside.

"Okay," I said. "Did he have any message for me?"

"He wants you to call him. I've got the number right here." She dug into her capacious purse and pulled out an index card with a telephone number penciled on it.

After leaving Archie's I had gone back to the office and retyped the revised chapter three and the letter to my editor. I finished around nine o'clock and thought about reading some more student papers just to put off calling Parker a while longer. As little as I wanted to call Parker, however, I wanted to grade papers even less. So I dialed the number. Answering machines were mercifully not so

ubiquitous in those days, and I held my breath while the phone rang eight times. I exhaled and hung up, feeling virtuous for having tried.

I packed my work away in the desk drawer and set out for home on foot. The small house I rented was only ten or twelve blocks from campus, so most days I walked to and from work. About a block from my house I could see an unfamiliar car, a Corvette, parked out front. Parker? I hesitated. What could he want from me? Well, he could want to rip my lungs out for squealing on him to the cops.

Right. Maybe the undergraduates weren't the only ones watching too much television. As I approached the car, a pale, wiry young man got out, staring at me with an intensity that was almost unnerving. His pale blue eyes were like chunks of ice.

"How could you know if I saw Jan that day?" He started right in without preamble.

"Mr. Parker?" I asked. "I couldn't know."

"You pompous ass! Why are you lying?"

"Look, just calm down. I don't know when—or whether—you saw Jan."

"Oh yeah? Then why did you tell the police I saw her? You lying bastard . . ." His fists were knotted up, and he was leaning forward as if about to pounce. He was so close I could feel his breath on my face—and smell alcohol on his breath. I tried to appear unruffled, but I hadn't been in a fight since the fifth grade. I wasn't at all confident that I could handle him.

I stepped backward, and he sprang, knocking me on my pompous ass. He probably hadn't been in a fight since the fifth grade either. He had no style. His arms flailed, but I managed to grab his wrists and roll over, pinning him under me.

I sat on his chest and held his arms to the ground. He writhed under me. "Just shut up and listen!" I yelled. And I told him about how I had found the note in the library book and what I had told Sergeant Allen.

A startling change came over him. He stopped fighting, his pale skin went chalk white, and tears welled up in his eyes. I let go of him, stood up, and dusted myself off. He lay on the ground whimpering. "God damn him," he whispered repeatedly.

I offered a hand to help him up, but he ignored it. He pushed himself to his feet and shuffled off to his car, murmuring. I watched as he jumped in the sports car and sped off. What the hell was that all about, I wondered. Who was he cursing? Me? Sergeant Allen?



I was shaken. Academics can be vicious, and their squabbles can be more bitter than any others I have ever encountered. They can afford to be, as someone once said, because the stakes are so low. But I had never before met with physical violence. I went into the house and called JoAnne. I had to tell somebody about the extraordinary encounter with Parker, but there was no answer. Ordinarily I think I would have called it a day and forgotten the whole business, but the tussle with Parker had got my adrenaline flowing. I couldn't relax.

I looked up Parker in the telephone book to find out where he lived. What I found started my mental wheels turning. There were two Alexander Parkers. The one whose telephone number JoAnne had given me was "III." He went by the name of Zan. Could the "Alex P." in Jan Garrett's note have been Zan's tyrannical father? Could it be he was trying to exercise his tyranny over his son through his son's girlfriend? Perhaps he didn't approve of her and tried to buy her off? And she wouldn't be bought, so he killed her? That was pretty extreme.

I tried JoAnne's number again. This time she answered on the third ring.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"At the library," she said. "I wanted to write up George's suggestions while they were fresh in my mind. And I had to look some things up." She was uncharacteristically subdued and sounded tired. I told her what had happened with Parker, and it seemed to wake her up.

"Good Lord! You may be right!" she exclaimed.

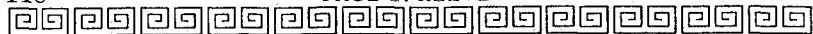
"Do you really think so? Do you think Alexander Parker would kill his son's girlfriend just because he didn't approve of her?"

"I don't know, but I think Zan might believe he would. That's what worries me. What will Zan do next?"

"Go after his father?"

I picked Jo up at her apartment. She was determined that we should "do something about Zan." That's what I like. A plan of action. We drove to the address that I had found in the telephone book, a condo in an expensive neighborhood west of the campus.

It looked as though every light in the place was ablaze. He certainly wasn't concerned about the electric bill. The Corvette, however, was nowhere to be seen, and we got no answer when we rang his bell.



"Now what?" I asked.

"We go to his father's house."

Alexander Parker the elder lived where the old money in town lived, a very exclusive neighborhood a little west of Zan's condo. As we drove, I told Jo about the book on wills and trusts that Jan Garrett had listed in her notes, and asked about the Parker money.

"The fortune," she said, "was made by the original Alexander Parker, Zan's grandfather. Maybe he established a trust for his grandchildren. Maybe Zan's father tried to buy off Jan—like you said—and she thumbed her nose at him. Why should she take the payola when she could marry Zan and get his share of the whole bundle?"

"That's a lot of maybes," I said.

The Parker estate sat well back from the street on a two acre lot with many ancient oaks, a wrought-iron fence, and circular drive. The gates to the fence stood open. We turned in and drove up to the front of the house. Zan's Corvette was nowhere in sight, but a nondescript Ford sedan was parked at the front door. The sedan had government license plates.

"Well, well," I said. "It looks like Sergeant Allen got here first."

We got out of the car and started up the front steps. Before we reached the top, the door opened. Framed in the doorway Sergeant Allen was shaking hands with a portly, florid man in his late fifties wearing a starched white shirt, gray flannel slacks, and black loafers with tassels. The tyrannical Alexander Parker didn't look very ferocious. And it didn't look like Allen was arresting him.

There was a pop like a lightbulb breaking, and I swatted at a bug buzzing past my ear. Parker spun around once and fell to the ground, a red stain spreading on his white shirtfront. Allen shouted, "Get down! Get down!" and dashed down the steps to his car.

At the end of the driveway Zan's Corvette was backing into the street at a high rate of speed. Allen took off in pursuit, leaving me and Jo to look after Parker.

The bullet had struck him in the right shoulder, just beneath the collarbone. He was in pain, but he wasn't going to die unless he bled to death. I tucked the Oriental rug from the foyer under his head while Jo ran to the kitchen and got some towels to apply pressure to the wound. While she was tending the wound, I found a phone and called for an ambulance.

Parker was restless as we waited for the ambulance. He tried to get up. We thought it best for him to lie still and let us apply pres-



sure to control the bleeding. Eventually we prevailed. He calmed down and began to talk.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You were shot," I said.

"Who?"

The question hung in the air for about five seconds. "I don't know," I said. "I'm not sure."

"Was it . . . Zan?"

"Maybe. Probably."

"Mmpf." And he faded from consciousness.

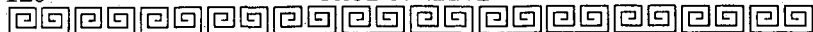
The following morning there was a brief newspaper account of the shooting of businessman Alexander Parker at his Belle Meade home by person or persons unknown. The article made no connection between the shooting and the death of Jan Garrett, but it did say that the police wanted to talk to Zan Parker.

Zan had apparently escaped Sergeant Allen. We hadn't waited around to find out. In the general hubbub after the ambulance, paramedics, and uniformed police arrived, Jo and I tried to tell what we knew, which wasn't much, to an officer, who wasn't particularly interested, and then quietly slipped away.

After my morning lectures, I skipped my usual stop at the student union for coffee and went instead to the law library to look up the book on wills and trusts that Jan had listed in her notes. I didn't expect to find much, but what I found, small thing that it was, changed my perspective on the matter of Jan Garrett's death entirely.

Thumbing through the small volume, I found many marginal notes and underlinings in pencil and various shades of ink, but only one passage highlighted with the familiar light green that Jan had used in the book on Pope. The passage said:

Discretionary trusts extend beyond the support trust. Not only is the beneficiary not entitled as a matter of right to the income (the usual situation), but is also not entitled to anything, including enough for support. The trustee, in the trustee's discretion, decides exactly how much, if any, income or principal or both should be used for the benefit of the beneficiaries. This blends the duty to pay into a power of appointment. Such a trust is best used when a trusted family member can supervise the distributions.



So if Zan was beneficiary of a discretionary trust and his father was the trustee, his father could have complete control over his income. Again, a lot of maybes. But did it even matter if it were true as long as Jan believed it was? The fact that she had researched the question suggested that she had reason to believe it. Walking back across campus to my office, I turned all this over in my mind.

How might events have unfolded? She met the senior Parker, let's assume, at one o'clock near the band shell in the park. That would be two days before her body was found, three days before I found the note in the library book. He threatened to cut Zan off without a cent if she didn't get out of his life. He told her that as trustee, he could do it. Maybe he sweetened the deal by offering her a cash bribe?

So what did she do? Apparently she went to the law library and read up on trusts. What she found showed that Parker could do just what he said. Maybe he even told her where to look to find out about the powers of the trustee. According to Jo, Jan was one of those people who live a soap opera, like Pope's Atossa:

*Her every turn with Violence pursu'd
Nor more a storm her Hate than Gratitude . . .*

As I passed the student union, I spotted George Boudreaux emerging from his midmorning coffee break just in time for lunch. I called to him.

"I was just coming to see you," he said.

"Oh? What's up?"

"Do you know where Miss Addison is? She missed the Encyclopaedists seminar this morning. Unlike her."

I told him about our adventure of the night before. "Maybe she was so unsettled by the experience that she decided to sleep in," I suggested. I didn't believe it. Jo wasn't the squeamish sort. If anything, the experience of being shot at had energized her.

"Well," said George, "when you see her, tell her I rearranged the schedule to work around her absence, and she will have to present her paper next week."

That worried me. Jo was one of those maddening people who always get things done well in advance. She wouldn't have cut a seminar to avoid presenting a paper. She would have been ready the week before.

We parted, and George headed to Archie's for lunch while I con-



tinued to my office. I thought about Jo. When I had left her at her apartment the night before, she was charged up. She wanted to do something. Find Zan. Point Allen in the right direction. She was sure Zan's father had killed Jan Garrett. What else could have driven Zan to the attempt on his father's life? For a student of neoclassical literature, she was an awful romantic. But on the other hand, patricide is a good classical theme, too.

I settled behind my desk and dialed Jo's number. She answered on the third ring.

"Hello, Jo," I said. "Where have you been? George said you weren't in his seminar this morning."

"Oh . . ." she hesitated, "I had other things to do. Busy day . . ." Her voice tapered off.

"Well, I found something interesting in the law library. It looks like Jan . . ."

"*Chaque instant de la vie est un pas vers la mort*," she said with a strained casualness.

"What?"

"Corneille," she said. "Think of the meter." The line went dead.

Something about life, *la vie* . . . and death, *la mort*. My ability to read French far outstripped my understanding of the spoken language. The meter? How do you scan French verse anyhow? But Corneille, that was a clue. The standard verse line of French neoclassical tragedy was . . . the twelve syllable line, the alexandrine. Alexander Parker. Zan. She couldn't talk because he was with her.

I called Sergeant Allen. He wasn't there, so I told the officer who answered the phone that I thought I knew where Zan Parker could be found.

"But listen," I said, "don't go in with sirens blasting. Don't do anything that could upset him. He may have a hostage." I gave him Jo's address.

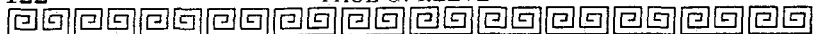
Jo lived in a small apartment building—a fourplex, really—just east of the campus. It was only a fifteen minute walk from my office. I made it there in ten. I arrived just as Allen pulled up at the curb in front of the apartment building. I waved to him and headed around the back. As I suspected, Zan's Corvette was parked in the carport out of sight of the street.

"He's here," I said to Allen, indicating the sports car.

"A SWAT team is on the way," Allen said.

"Let me try to talk to him," I suggested.

"Right. Then he'll have two hostages."



"Not necessarily. I'm not sure this is a hostage situation yet. Let's not make it one." Without waiting for an answer, I stepped over to the back door to the apartment and rapped twice. Allen just stood there, lips pursed, shaking his head.

Jo opened the door and let me in. The back door opened into a small kitchen. Jo led me into the living room without saying a word. Zan was sitting on the edge of the sofa, elbows on knees, face in hands. On the floor was a rifle with a scope. I don't know what kind or caliber. I know nothing about firearms.

"Zan? What happened?" I asked. He didn't stir. I looked at JoAnne.

"When he shot his father, he didn't know where to turn. He knew he couldn't go home. After he lost Sergeant Allen, he drove around for a while, but he knew the police would be on the lookout for him. He came here because he knew I was Jan's friend."

"But what does he want?" I asked, eyeing the rifle uneasily. "He can't stay here indefinitely."

He looked up. His eyes were wet and red. "What do I want? I want . . . I want to be dead," he sobbed, dropping his head into his hands again. JoAnne sat beside him on the sofa and stroked the back of his neck.

I've always had trouble dealing with intense emotional scenes. That's probably why I specialized in Restoration and eighteenth century literature, where the best plays are comedies and the best poems are satires. JoAnne, though a specialist in neoclassicism herself, had a power of empathy that was far beyond me. While Jo comforted Zan, I eased myself between him and the rifle lying on the floor and pushed it away with my foot.

"Zan," I said, "Sergeant Allen is waiting outside. Shall I invite him in?" He didn't respond. I picked up the rifle and went to the back door. Allen was standing next to the Corvette, agitatedly smoking a cigarette. I showed him the rifle and waved for him to come in.

"It was an accident," Jo said, pouring a glass of chardonnay and settling back on the sofa. Sergeant Allen had left with Zan in custody, and the police tow truck had hauled off the Corvette to be examined by the forensic team.

"An accident?" I asked.

"We talked all night. Zan wasn't very coherent, but it seems that Jan called him and said that she was dropping out of school again



at the end of the semester and didn't want to see him any more. She wouldn't say why. She said law school was taking too much of his time. She was a burden on him. She was unhappy—none of which rang true to him. He went over to her apartment and caught her just as she was coming out the door. She lived in an apartment over a garage at a residence south of the campus. She refused to talk to him and tried to push past him. He grabbed her arm, and she yanked herself free, lost her footing, and plunged down the cast-iron stairway. She had a deep gash in her forehead . . . and her neck was broken.

"He loaded her into his car to take her to the hospital. But he knew she was dead. When he got to the emergency room entrance, he drove right past. He didn't know where he was going. He drove out of town until he found an isolated spot. He sat there for a long time, he said.

"The sound of a train roused him. When it had passed, he went out on the trestle and looked into the deep, wooded ravine. He was going to throw himself off the trestle, but he hadn't the courage."

"So he threw her off instead?"

"Cynic. Yes. He was frightened. He didn't know what to do."

"Oh? What about turning himself in and explaining what happened?"

"That's easier said than done. Try to put yourself in his place. He was overwrought to begin with. He loved her, and she was leaving him. And then this happened . . ."

"But still he had sufficient presence of mind to return to Jan's apartment, find the English paper she was working on, and turn it in."

"Mmm. I forgot that . . . But why? Why would he do that?"

"Who knows? Maybe he told someone he was going to see her that night, and he wanted to make sure that it appeared she was still alive the next day when the paper was turned in. He probably didn't expect the body to be found as soon as it was."

In any event, I thought, his legal career was over before it started. The bar association doesn't look kindly on you if you fail to report a death, even an accidental death, hide the body, and go around taking potshots at a citizen, even if he is your father.

The full story came out at the trial. The meeting in the park between Jan and Parker had gone pretty much as I had surmised. He had offered her a bribe, and she had accepted it. Zan preferred to

believe that it was a sacrifice on her part, that she agreed to leave him rather than let his father ruin his life. To me, though, it seemed that the ten thousand dollars the police found in her checking account must have taken much of the sting out of the sacrifice.

Jan's death had occurred just as Zan had told JoAnne. At least that was the official verdict. I don't know. He had a temper as I'd learned in my first encounter with him. And then having the presence of mind to take her keys, go back to her apartment, find the Pope paper, and turn it in—that may have been a desperate act, but it took a cooler head than I would have had in the circumstances.

He had to do it, though, because when he arrived at Jan's apartment he had spoken to her landlord, who was just leaving on a business trip. He had to make it appear that she was still alive the next day, and it might have worked, too, if her body hadn't been found on the same day that he turned in the paper.

I suppose he would have been found out eventually anyway, but the plagiarism had led me to the note in the library book, and the note led to his father, and finding out that his father was behind Jan's abandonment of him had pushed him over the edge.

JoAnne and I have often discussed the matter.

"He really loved her," Jo says.

"He thought he did," I say. "But I think he knew better, at the end."

"After she betrayed him?"

"He betrayed her first, five years ago. What if all she wanted this time around was to get even, to get back at both of the Parkers? Like Atossa, 'Who breaks with her, provokes Revenge from Hell . . .'"

A Matter of Principle

Sandra Salazar and
Wayne L. Tappon



You'd think anyone charged with murder would be scared as hell, or at least apprehensive, but Angel Cabrone acted as if his arrest and imprisonment were nothing more than another plot by the establishment to frame an innocent member of a minority.

"Hey, Miss Laura, you gonna help us sue the city for false arrest and . . . whadda ya call it? Harassment?" He was swaggering around the interrogation room like a showgirl, his skinny butt jammed in the two-sizes-too-small orange jumpsuit the county had issued him. I could only dream of fitting my bod into pants that small. Angel has a build like a flamenco dancer and the arrogance of a Hollywood film star, and to say he has an attitude is like saying Madonna sometimes flaunts her sexuality.

"We want to sue old lady Carlson, too," he added. "We never got our money from her cheap-skate husband."

I sighed. Mrs. Carlson was the widow of the man they were accused of murdering.

As a public defender for the County of Los Angeles I had been sent to interview the defendants and decide which of the two boys I would represent. Although he'd said practically nothing, I'd almost decided Douglas Rivera was a better bet. Angel Cabrone was too unpredictable.

"Mr. Cabrone," I told him, "under the law you and Mr. Rivera will each have to have your own attorney. I will be representing Mr. Rivera and another attorney, who should be here any moment, will be your lawyer."

Angel argued that he wanted me, too, but I had to be adamant. Technically they could sign waivers so I could represent both, but it would be subject to the judge's approval, and in California it wasn't easy to get that approval. Since they'd been charged with the same crime, not only could I not represent them both, they couldn't even have two attorneys from the Public Defender's Office. Tom Cohen, an attorney in private practice, would be Angel Cabrone's lawyer.

While Angel was complaining, Tom came in, and I introduced him to his client. Angel eyed him with suspicion. Tom and I had a quick whispered discussion, and he agreed to a joint conference with the defendants.

I wanted to believe the boys were innocent, but after several years of defending cold-eyed murderers, thieves, gang-bangers, and perverts who invariably insisted they were not guilty, I'd learned to take claims of innocence with a generous helping of skepticism.

Still, a quick reading of the complaint had shown me the D.A. didn't have a very convincing murder charge. I guessed they'd charged Angel and Douglas Rivera with murder anticipating that someone from the public defender's office would offer to plead it down to involuntary manslaughter. Since the two were virtually inseparable, I expected the verdict, whatever it was, would apply to both cases unless Tom talked Angel into accepting a plea. I turned to my client.

"What do you say, Douglas? If that mudslide was caused by your negligence, you could end up serving time. If the D.A. can prove intent, a jury might convict you of second degree murder."

Douglas sat shaking his head. "No way, Miss Mason."

"Call me Laura," I told him. "All my clients call me by my first name."

It was true. Not all of the other PD's felt the way I did, but since the people I defended had no say in their choice of attorney, they tended to see me as part of the problem. I had enough trouble convincing them that I was on their side without the formality of "Miss Mason." I could see Douglas Rivera mentally struggling with the concept of using my first name and that impressed me. He obviously had

a better upbringing than most of my clients.

"We haven't done anything, Miss . . . Miss Laura. I won't pretend I'm sorry that Carlson is dead, but we didn't kill him. I hated the way he treated people, and I wish he'd paid us before he died, but we had nothing to do with his death."

Douglas Rivera didn't talk like the typical kid raised in the barrio, nor did he look the part. He was dark-complexioned, but his features were more lean, handsome Castilian than Indio and he had startling blue eyes. His mother, I thought, was probably Scandinavian or maybe Irish. He too had the slim build of a toreador, and I knew I'd never be able to squeeze my thirty-five-year-old hips into his jeans either.

"Why don't you tell me what happened," I said. "Some of the report doesn't make much sense."

"Hey, we got our own business," Angel boasted. "We're landscapers and gardeners. We're gonna be big. Real big."

Tom Cohen looked up from his doodling but didn't say anything. He had only recently passed the bar and had chosen to open his own office. He'd gotten his name on a list of attorneys the county uses in cases such as these, and I'd heard that these cases—paid by the coun-

ty—represented most of his income.

Douglas looked at his partner patiently, then explained.

"We're trying to get established. We don't have much money, and almost all of what we make goes for equipment or advertising. We mow lawns and do a little planting for a few regular customers and we're pretty good, but we're still trying to build a reputation. Mr. Carlson was the first big job we had, and we counted on it to get us more work."

"What was the job exactly?"

"Carlson saw one of the flyers we put in mailboxes and wanted us to install an automatic sprinkler system behind his house. He lived halfway up that steep hill where they built those big homes." Douglas waved his hand in a vaguely easterly direction, then went on. "The street winds back and forth till it gets to the real expensive places way up at the top."

"Kinda like those towns in Europe," Angel said, grinning. Douglas nodded to acknowledge the interruption but kept his gaze on me.

"Carlson had heard about these automatic systems that work off a timer but have sensors in the ground that test for the amount of moisture in the soil. If the ground is too wet, the sprinklers won't come on."

"I didn't know they could do that," I said. "Do they work?"

"Oh, sure," Douglas said. "They work great. Particularly on steep hillsides like the one behind Carlson's house, but they're expensive. Real expensive." He shook his head sadly. "I had to tell Carlson we couldn't take the job because we didn't have the money to buy the system and we hadn't established credit yet. For a place the size of his, the timers and electronic sensors and pipe and stuff would run twelve to fifteen thousand dollars."

"But you ended up doing it anyway?"

"Sure!" Angel was grinning. "After he foun' out what other contractors were charging. The big phony threw us out the first time, then called us back two weeks later." Angel jeered. "Ol' Carlson, he wanted to go first class, but he din't wanta pay for it."

Douglas waited patiently for his partner to finish, then took up the story. "He had us draw up some diagrams and figure the cost of the materials, then he gave us a check up front that would pay for the stuff we needed. It came to more than twelve thousand dollars, and we took it right to the manufacturer."

I was impressed. Most of my clients never saw that kind of money unless they were dealing

in rock cocaine or methamphetamine. These two couldn't have been more than twenty years old. Douglas Rivera looked younger.

"Have you installed many systems like this one?"

They both fidgeted before Douglas answered. "No ma'am. This was the first sprinkler system we ever did. When I found out what he wanted and what it would cost, I went to the Waterscape Company—they make systems like this, and one of their engineers helped us. He drew up the plans and made up the parts lists for us." Douglas smiled.

"He was real nice. When I told him what we were trying to do, he showed us through the plant and explained how everything worked and said if we needed help in installing it we should call him. We did, too, and he was just as nice on the phone. We'd never have gotten it in without his help."

I started scribbling. "What's his name, and will he testify?"

They both shrugged those depictive Hispanic shrugs. "His name is Hanna," Douglas said. "Tom Hanna, but I don't know if he'll testify. What would he testify to?"

I had to think about that. "I'm not sure yet. I need to know more." I looked down at the arrest report. "It says that Mrs.

Carlson was the one who accused you of murder. She says you threatened her husband the day before he died." I skimmed the pages. "That was yesterday. He was killed about two thirty in the morning." I looked up at them. "She and several neighbors heard you arguing loudly with Mr. Carlson the afternoon before he was killed."

Angel had stopped pacing and had sunk down into one of the plain wooden chairs, his expression cocky and defiant. I went on.

"She'll probably testify that her husband planned to sue you for installing a defective sprinkler system and that you threatened him. Then that night the whole hillside gave way, and a huge mudslide crashed through the sliding glass door and smothered Mr. Carlson in his bed. Is that the way it happened?"

I was talking to Douglas, but again Angel answered. He favored me with another depictive shrug. "The mud wen' through his house, I guess, but that wasn' our fault."

"But the report says the hill was saturated with water. If you installed the system and it over-soaked the hill, then under the law you're responsible. Even if you didn't mean to, your negligence caused great property damage and a death."

Douglas shook his head vehemently. "But we weren't negligent. Mr. Hanna said it would only take three or four days to install the system, but it took us three weeks. We wanted to be sure it was just right, and we called him a lot to be sure we weren't making any mistakes."

His fists were clenched, and you could hear the grinding of his teeth as he glared at me in frustration. "Don't you see, Miss Laura, this was our chance to get away from just mowing lawns and trimming hedges. We needed this system to work real good so we could get some decent paying jobs for a change." Douglas stared down at his clenched fists. "Having our customer get killed isn't exactly what you'd call good publicity."

I was beginning to believe them, and I cautioned myself to go slowly. I'd believed clients in the past who were the picture of baby-faced innocence and ended up with egg on my face.

"What did the police do to investigate?"

"We don't know." Angel looked solemn for a change. "They woke me up in the middle of the night and threw cuffs on me. I wasn't even awake hardly. When I got out to the car, they had Doug already there. We didn't even know what we were supposed to've done."

"Did you threaten Mr. Carlson?"

Angel exploded. "Goddamn right we did. He followed us out to the street hollerin', and I tol' him I'd kick his fat butt all the way to the bottom of the hill if he didn't pay us what he owed us." His face took on that self-righteous expression that always seems to go with his next words. "It was a matter of principle."

Tom Cohen reached over and laid a hand on Angel's arm. I heard him say something about not volunteering information. Angel glared at him.

Douglas spoke quietly. "Angel is excitable. He said that to Carlson after Carlson said he was gonna sue us. And it was more a matter of money than principle. Carlson owed us a bundle. You see, Miss Laura, we finished the job six weeks ago, and he's been stalling ever since. We came back yesterday 'cause he called and said the system wasn't working right. We spent two hours going over everything, and it all checked out perfect."

Douglas looked down at the table and added in a low voice, "I told him if we didn't get the four thousand he'd promised us for labor, we'd get a mechanic's lien on his property."

"I'm sure," I said, "that if everything I've heard about Mr.

Carlson is true, he took that threat seriously."

"It made him awful mad," Douglas admitted. "That's when he started hollerin' about takin' us to court for fraud and stuff."

I was reading as he was talking. "Mrs. Carlson said her husband told you the sprinklers hardly ever came on when they were supposed to so you must have installed them wrong."

"They didn't come on because the ground was too wet. I told you the sensors won't let the water run in any of the control sections if the ground is already wet enough."

"Well, if the water never came on, how did the ground get wet enough to slide into his bedroom?"

More of the kinds of shrugs where their shoulders tried to cover up their ears.

It was Angel who answered. "We figure he must have been messin' with the timers or somethin'. The ground should'na got that wet."

Now I shrugged. "There's a preliminary hearing tomorrow. If you're bound over for trial, I'll try to get bail. If you're charged with second degree murder, bail will be pretty high. Can your families help out?"

Doug stared back in hopeless silence. Angel had forgotten the question. He was looking me up and down, appraising.

"Hey, Miss Laura, soon as you get us outa here, maybe you'd like to go out sometime. Grab somethin' to eat, maybe catch some music." He nodded in approval. "You look like you'd be a dynamite dancer." He was practically drooling. Tom's ears had reddened. He stared down at his legal pad and wouldn't look at me or his client.

I looked at Doug. He was shaking his head in embarrassment and seemed to be more bothered than I was. In my job I have to take that kind of thing in stride. It wasn't the first time I'd been hit on by someone I wouldn't be seen with at a Demolition Derby. I kept my voice matter-of-fact.

"Getting you out of here may take some doing. I won't be able to talk to any witnesses today. I'm scheduled for court all afternoon. I'll see all of you in the morning, and, Tom, if you agree it's necessary, I'll try to get a continuance."

"Continuance!" Angel's expression was distrustful. "Don't that mean we gotta stay in jail longer?"

In court that afternoon I did what the county paid me to do. I was able to plea-bargain two cases down to misdemeanors even though I knew society wouldn't miss those particular clients if they disap-

peared into prison for several years.

When court let out about four, I hurried over to the station to find Sergeant Jake Tully. Jake was a veteran officer who'd been my dad's partner in the Los Angeles police force before Dad retired. Jake and I went way back, and I considered him family. He'd bounced me on his knee when I was still in diapers.

He was just coming off duty, and I went with him to the Dragon to hoist a short one and pick his brains. I ordered a gin and tonic, and Jake had his usual Miller's. He didn't know anything about the Carlson case. He was working robbery and hadn't heard much. He was familiar with the area of the slide, though, since he'd grown up around there.

He told me Carlson's house was in a fairly new development in the hills near Dodger Stadium. Houses that had been part of the neighborhood for eighty years had been quietly bought up one or two at a time by a development company and eventually bulldozed to the ground to make room for the new hillside home project. In the process they'd also scraped away a healthy layer of topsoil. Of course, this being California, they'd ripped out all the century-old trees and shrubs and replaced them with spindly sticks

and yellowish sod. Despite the recent efforts of landscapers to make the expensive homes look like they'd always been there, the area still appeared barren.

I explained the circumstances of the alleged crime, and Jake nodded. "Gotta be careful what you plant in those hills. The ground used to be pretty solid because the trees and brush had been there forever, but after they tore everything out . . ." He shook his head and took another sip of his Miller's. "What made the guy think he could hire a couple of kids to put in a sophisticated system like that?"

"But if they did put it in right, Jake, what could make the ground so wet?"

"Nothing. There's been no rain, and if that's the only water lines on the hill, and if the kids just installed them, they screwed up." He looked at me. "But I don't see it as murder. Even if they threatened him, they couldn't time something like that. It would take a long time to get the ground wet enough to slide. I see it as criminal negligence. Manslaughter maybe." He took another sip. "Not murder, though."

Jake did agree to look at the records and see if Carlson had any history with the police department. I could get the same information myself through the

D.A.'s office if I could explain why I was so interested in the victim, but it seemed easier to ask Jake for the favor. I also wanted him to see if he could find out if Doug or Angel had any records as juveniles. Since their juvenile records would be sealed, I'd have to hope someone Jake knew remembered one or both of them.

The preliminary hearing was over in no time. Mrs. Carlson testified that the defendants had shouted at her husband and "threatened to kick him." She believed firmly that they had sneaked back and sabotaged the system so the mudslide would kill her husband. She said the system had never worked properly and after her husband spent all that money they tried to demand more from him and said they'd kill him if he didn't pay.

Under cross-examination I got her to admit she hadn't actually heard anyone threaten to kill Mr. Carlson, but that was about all. She knew her husband had written one large check to the boys but didn't seem to be aware that it only covered the cost of materials. She swore he told her it was for everything including labor. I think she was telling the truth, and I was sorry I'd asked. She also managed to sneak in a comment about how grateful she was that she'd decided a few

weeks ago to move to her own bedroom. "Otherwise I'd be dead now, too!"

I considered asking her what had motivated her to move out of her husband's bedroom, but the old adage attorneys consider gospel stopped me. In short, never ask a question you don't know the answer to. If I could find out, I might ask her in front of a jury if the case got that far.

Tom's examination of the Widow Carlson was very brief. He asked her which of the boys had actually threatened her husband and what had been said. But she said she didn't see the argument, just heard parts of it, so she couldn't say who had actually said what.

I like to keep an eye on the spectators particularly when there's no jury. It gives me a feel of how my case is going, so when Tom Cohen was up, I looked around the room. This time there weren't many spectators other than the usual odd assortment of people who like to hang around courthouses. One character in particular caught my eye. I wouldn't have known how to describe him at the time except to say he looked creepy. He was a jumble of mismatched parts. A plump, doughy body topped with a face too thin for the rest of him. Tiny eyes set too close to each other and a chin trying to recede to the point of

invisibility. His body sat motionless like a lump of Silly Putty while his head moved in jerky rodentlike movements as he scrutinized the courtroom, staring mostly at the defendants and Mrs. Carlson. Our gazes locked momentarily, and I got a strange chill staring into eyes that seemed to glitter with malevolence. I remember wondering if he was on something, and when I turned away, I fancied I could feel his stare boring into the back of my head.

Two neighbors appeared and testified separately that Carlson and the two boys were yelling so loud "you could hear them in San Pedro." Again I was able to force admissions that most of the threats seemed to come from Carlson. They also admitted as I pushed that it wasn't the first time Carlson had had trouble with people. Tom Cohen's cross-examinations more or less echoed mine.

It didn't help. The case was bound over to Superior Court. The judge ruled the boys had a motive, so the charge was murder in the second degree. Bail was set at a level even a professional athlete might have trouble meeting. With an earnest plea for my clients' right to a speedy trial, I got a calendar date three weeks away.

My plan at that point was to convince Angel's lawyer and my

client that their best bet was to cop a plea. Settle for manslaughter before the Widow Carlson cried crocodile tears all over the jury and got them convicted of murder. The boys didn't even give it much thought before turning us down. Angel told Tom it was a matter of principle.

Jake was a big help to me. When he met me in the bar the following week, he had quite a bit of potentially useful information. I already knew that neither of the boys had had any trouble with the law since they'd turned eighteen, but it was their juvenile records—sealed by law—I was interested in. As I'd hoped, Jake had talked to a cop who had known Angel since he was a kid. He told Jake—off the record—that Angel had had several juvenile arrests but it was almost all minor stuff. The only serious charge had been grand theft auto when he was sixteen, but that was knocked down to joyriding.

As far as Jake knew, Doug had no juvenile arrest record.

Jake, as usual, was sipping on a beer while I was letting the ice melt in my gin and tonic. The evening got interesting when he got to Mr. Carlson. It seems our friend was well known to the police on his beat. There were any number of com-

plaints about altercations with neighbors. The complaints had started when Carlson moved into the new project and had continued right up to the time of his death. Apparently Mr. Carlson had a fierce temper, an intolerance for the rights of others, and a hearing problem. He played his television and radio at top volume at all hours and roared curses at anyone who tried to get him to tone things down. He'd threatened to poison any dogs that violated his yard and had been accused by one neighbor of smearing dog poop all over her front door. The woman insisted her little Bridget never left her own yard and no one else but Carlson would be that nasty. She was probably right, but there were no witnesses so no charges were brought. According to Jake, Mr. Carlson wasn't on speaking terms with anyone on his block.

The neighbor who lived immediately above him on the street that wound up the hill had actually had a court battle with the Carlsons.

"Apparently what happened," Jake told me, "is that Donald Devine has a powerful telescope that he uses to look out over the city. Carlson looked up the hill one night and saw Devine on his balcony and swore he was looking down and spying on him. After a vicious argument that

woke most of the neighborhood, Carlson tried to get an injunction against Devine and his telescope, but the court wouldn't grant it."

"That doesn't sound like much, Jake."

"No, but that wasn't the end of it. They continued yelling threats at each other until Carlson had a row of juniper trees planted as a screen at the top of his property. Devine was furious, and after another bitter verbal battle, Devine went to court to try to force Carlson to remove the junipers. Claimed they blocked his entire view of the city."

Jake laughed. "That didn't work, either. The injunction was denied."

I stared into my drink and mused out loud. "So the neighbor with the biggest grievance lived *above* Carlson. Jake, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Jake studied me for at least thirty seconds. A smile gradually appeared. "Yeah, maybe I am."

"I don't suppose you've already checked out Mr. Donald Devine."

"Not yet," Jake said. "His name wasn't on your list."

The next day I got hold of Tom Hanna, the engineer from the Waterscape Company, who as it turned out, was also vice-presi-

dent in charge of product design. When he heard about the kids' problem, he agreed to meet me at the Carlson house.

We met outside. He was a silver-haired man in his fifties. He seemed affable with an air of competence. When we shook hands, I could feel the calluses and knew he hadn't always had a desk job. He started talking as we shook hands.

"It's hard for me to believe those boys made any serious errors in the installation, Miss Mason. Young Rivera has a real grasp of the mechanics of the system, and when he was in doubt, he asked questions rather than make a mistake."

"So if the system were functioning properly, the ground couldn't get soaked enough to slide. Is that true?"

"Yes and no," he said. "The ground couldn't get that wet from the sprinklers, but I understand that Carlson put in ice plant against the advice of Rivera and Cabrone. Thousands of houses in Southern California use ice plant as a ground cover, but we don't recommend it for steep slopes. Ice plant has a shallow root system and won't keep the ground from sliding if it's overwatered. Heavy rain for several days might have done the same thing, but we haven't had any rain."

"Why would he plant ice plant on a slope that steep, then?"

Hanna frowned. "Ice plant absorbs and holds water and is virtually fireproof. According to young Rivera, Carlson was afraid of firestorms. If he planted foliage that wasn't fireproof, he was afraid fire could come down the hill and destroy his house. He wouldn't listen to any explanation of other plant systems."

We stepped around a skip loader that was transporting mud from the back yard to a dump truck in the driveway. The work crew hired to clean up the mess had removed a section of fence to allow access to the back yard.

Hanna said, "I also advised them to terrace the slope before they installed the system, but Carlson turned them down cold. Said they were just trying to gouge him for extra labor charges." Hanna shook his head as he squatted down to inspect the control center. Fortunately the boys had installed it on the side of the house opposite Carlson's bedroom, so it had been missed by the mud.

"I got the impression," Hanna said, "that Mr. Carlson was not a very reasonable man."

I watched as he tested each of the electrical connections with a small portable gadget with gauges and dials, keeping

up a running monologue as he worked. He said the wires to the control center, encased in tubing, had originally gone to each underground moisture sensor. The tubing and the water pipes were now a tangle of junk in the mud at the bottom of the hill.

"There were four sensors in the system," he explained. "Each sensor controlled a row of four sprinkler heads. Since water runs downhill, the sprinklers at the bottom were less likely to come on as often, or stay on as long, as the ones at the top of the hill. The timer was set to turn on the system twice a day for twenty minutes. The sprinklers toward the bottom might not run for the full twenty minutes or even come on at all if the ground was wet enough."

I was reminded of something the boys had told me and Mrs. Carlson had alluded to in court. "Carlson was yelling at the boys that the system didn't work because the sprinklers rarely came on when they were supposed to. It might have been an excuse for not paying them, but is it possible?"

Hanna looked at me sharply. "I don't see how," he said. "Not in this weather." He turned, stared up the hill, then started striding across the yard. "Let's take a look."

I struggled to catch up, mut-

tering to myself because I hadn't had enough sense to wear something other than open-toed pumps. By the time I made it to the top of the muddy slope the shoes were history. Tom Hanna was squatting by the junipers, examining the ground. He carefully scooped out wet dirt from what appeared to be a filled-in trench and pointed.

"There's your problem. See that groove there in the ground? There was a pipe lying down there. See? Some of the ground has washed away, but it looks like it stretched all the way along the top of the property. It's a wonder it didn't take out these junipers."

"I don't understand," I said, although I already knew where we were heading. "What was the pipe for?"

"My guess is that it was a soaker pipe. A pipe with small holes drilled in it and buried under the soil about . . . oh, say ten or twelve inches."

"But why?" I was playing dumb. "Why would Carlson install soakers when he'd just paid for a Rolls-Royce sprinkler system?" I hoped Hanna would catch up with me and say it out loud.

Hanna shook his head. "I don't know. Unless he was using this as a ploy to avoid paying the boys for their installation." He

paused. "Or unless someone else put it in without his knowledge."

Bingo! We both stood at the same time and looked over the wall to the house above. The man I assumed was Donald Devine stood next to the telescope on his second story balcony, watching. I realized with a shock that I was looking into the same weasel eyes of the creep from the courthouse. He turned and went into his house as we stared.

Hanna dropped to his knees and crawled along the wall separating the two properties, searching. "Here, I think." He pointed at some freshly turned soil that ran vertically uphill and seemed to disappear under the wall. "This looks like the place where the water line to the soaker was installed."

"Is it there now?"

"No, if that's what it was, it's been dug up. There's nothing there now but this filled-in trench."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Hanna," I blurted. "I'm sorry to be rude, but I've got to run. I've got to get a court order to inspect the property."

If Judge Banuelos hadn't issued the order on the spot, or if Donald Devine had owned a pickup, we might never have caught him. My phone call had alerted the homicide team, and as we drove up, Devine was

loading lengths of metal pipe into a U-Haul trailer. The longest sections had tiny holes drilled three inches apart.

After the arrest I found out that Jake had been trying to reach me. In checking, he'd discovered that Devine had barely escaped first degree murder charges back in Indiana when he'd booby-trapped his front doorknob with high voltage electricity and electrocuted an angry neighbor who'd tried to force his way in. The man had accused Devine of spying on his teenaged daughter with a telescope and had clearly intended great bodily harm. The jury apparently had some "a man's home is his castle" advocates, and after two mistrials Devine was turned loose.

Devine claimed to be a mechanical engineer but hadn't been employed since the early seventies when his parents were killed in a residence fire. Since then he'd been living off a very generous inheritance. A year after his last murder trial Devine was charged with statutory rape, but the case was dismissed when the parents of the fifteen-year-old girl refused to let her testify in open court. Shortly after, Donald Devine had moved to California.

After his arrest and before his highpriced defense attorney arrived and shut him up, Devine

was quoted as saying he'd never intended to harm anyone. He said he only wanted to wipe out the junipers and restore his view.

Sure!

The case against Douglas Rivera and Angel Cabrone never went to trial. The D.A.'s office could have been a little more gracious when they withdrew the charges and the judge ordered the immediate release of the defendants, but the closest they came to an apology was, "Well, if we didn't get them this time, we'll get them next time."

Doug Rivera was obviously relieved. He gave me a giant bear hug and thanked me at least a

dozen times. Angel Cabrone gave Tom a perfunctory handshake, then swaggered up to me and winked suggestively, letting his eyes travel up and down my frame.

"So now you gonna handle the lawsuit against the city for false arrest and stuff?" he demanded. "And that old lady. She owes us almost five thousand. We gonna sue her first, or after we sue the city? An' hey, Miss Laura, you wanna go dancin' tonight or tomorrow?"

He was still talking as Doug Rivera dragged him away. Someday I may go into private practice but not in this part of town. Call it a matter of principle.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Christabel's Crystal

Carolyn Wells



ILLUSTRATION BY HANK BLAUSTEIN

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Of all the unexpected pleasures that have come into my life, I think perhaps the greatest was when Christabel Farland asked me to be bridesmaid at her wedding.

I always had liked Christabel at college, and though we hadn't seen much of each other since we were graduated, I still had a strong feeling of friendship for her, and besides that, I was glad to be one of the merry houseparty gathered at Farland Hall for the wedding festivities.

I arrived the afternoon before the wedding day and found the family and guests drinking tea in the library. Two other bridesmaids were there, Alice Fordham and Janet White, with both of whom I was slightly acquainted. The men, however, except Christabel's brother Fred, were strangers to me and were introduced as Mr. Richmond, who was to be an usher; Herbert Gay, a neighbor who chanced to be calling; and Mr. Wayne, the tutor of Christabel's younger brother Harold. Mrs. Farland was there, too, and her welcoming words to me were as sweet and cordial as Christabel's.

The party was in frivolous mood, and as the jests and laughter grew more hilarious, Mrs. Farland declared that she would take the bride-elect away to her room for a quiet rest lest she should not appear at her best the next day.

"Come with me, Elinor," said Christabel to me, "and I will show you my wedding gifts."

Together we went to the room set apart for the purpose, and on many white-draped tables I saw displayed the gorgeous profusion of silver, glass, and bric-a-brac that are one of the chief component parts of a wedding of today.

I had gone entirely through my vocabulary of ecstatic adjectives and was beginning over again when we came to a small table which held only one wedding gift.

"That is the gem of the whole collection," said Christabel with a happy smile, "not only because Laurence gave it to me, but because of its intrinsic perfection and rarity."

I looked at the bridegroom's gift in some surprise. Instead of the conventional diamond sunburst or heartshaped brooch, I saw a crystal ball as large as a fair-sized orange.

I knew of Christabel's fondness for Japanese crystals and that she had a number of small ones of varying qualities, but this mag-

nificent specimen fairly took my breath away. It was poised on the top of one of those wavecrests, which the artisans seem to think appropriately interpreted in wrought-iron. Now, I haven't the same subtle sympathy with crystals that Christabel always has had, but still this great, perfect, limpid sphere affected me strangely. I glanced at it at first with a calm interest, but as I continued to look, I became fascinated and soon found myself obliged (if I may use the expression) to tear my eyes away.

Christabel watched me curiously. "Do you love it, too?" she said, and then she turned her eyes to the crystal with a rapt and rapturous gaze that made her appear lovelier than ever. "Wasn't it dear of Laurence?" she said. "He wanted to give me jewels, of course, but I told him that I would rather have this big crystal than the Koh-i-nur. I have six others, you know, but the largest of them hasn't one-third the diameter of this."

"It is wonderful," I said, "and I am glad you have it. I must own it frightens me a little."

"That is because of its perfection," said Christabel simply. "Absolute flawless perfection always is awesome. And when it is combined with perfect, faultless beauty, it is the ultimate perfection of a material thing."

"But I thought you liked crystals because of their weird supernatural influence over you," I said.

"That is an effect, not a cause," Christabel replied. "Ultimate perfection is so rare in our experiences that its existence perforce produces consequences so rare as to be dubbed weird and supernatural. But I must not gaze at my crystal longer now, or I shall forget that it is my wedding day. I'm not going to look at it again until after I return from my wedding trip, and then, as I tell Laurence, he will have to share my affection with his wedding gift to me."

Christabel gave the crystal a long, parting look and then ran away to don her wedding gown. "Elinor," she called over her shoulder as she neared her own door, "I'll leave my crystal in your special care. See that nothing happens to it while I'm away."

"Trust me!" I called back gaily and then went in search of my sister-bridesmaids.

The morning after the wedding began rather later than most mornings. But at last we all were seated at the breakfast table and enthusiastically discussing the events of the night before. It seemed strange to be there without Christabel, and Mrs. Farland said that

I must stay until the bridal pair returned, for she couldn't get along without a daughter of some sort.

This remark made me look anywhere rather than at Fred Farland, and so I chanced to catch Harold's eye. But the boy gave me such an intelligent, mischievous smile that I actually blushed and was covered with confusion.

Just at that moment Katy the parlormaid came into the dining room and with an anxious expression on her face said, "Mrs. Farland, do you know anything about Miss Christabel's glass ball? It isn't in the present room."

"No," said Mrs. Farland, "but I suppose Mr. Haley put it in the safe with the silver and jewelry."

"I don't think so, ma'am, for he asked me was he to take any of the cut glass; and I told him you had said only the silver and gold, ma'am."

"But that crystal isn't cut glass, Katy, and it's more valuable than all Miss Christabel's silver gifts put together."

"Oh my! is it, ma'am? Well then, won't you please see if it's all right, for I'm worried about it."

I wish I could describe my feelings at this moment. Have you ever been in imminent danger of a fearful catastrophe of any kind, and while with all your heart and soul you hoped it might be averted; yet there was one little, tiny, hidden impulse of your mind that craved the excitement of the disaster? Perhaps it is only an ignoble nature that can have this experience, or there may be a partial excuse for me in the fact that I am afflicted with what sometimes is called the "detective instinct." I say afflicted, for I well know that anyone else who has this particular mental bias will agree with me that it causes far more annoyance than satisfaction.

Why, one morning when I met Mrs. Van Allen in the market, I said, "It's too bad your waitress had to go out of town to attend the funeral of a near relative when you were expecting company to luncheon." And she was as angry as could be and called me an impertinent busybody.

But I just had deduced it all from her glove. You see, she had on one brand new black kid glove, and the other, though crumpled up in her hand, I could see never had been on at all. So I knew that she wouldn't start to market early in the morning with such gloves if she had any sort of half-worn black ones at all.

And I knew that she had given away her next best pair recently—it must have been the night before, or she would have tried

them on sooner, and as her cook is an enormous woman, I was sure that she had given them to her waitress. And why would she unless the maid was going away in great haste? And what would require such a condition of things except a sudden call to a funeral? And it must have been out of town or she would have waited until morning, and then she could have bought black gloves for herself. And it must have been a near relative to make the case so urgent. And I knew that Mrs. Van Allen expected luncheon guests because her fingers were stained from paring apples and why would she pare her own apples so early in the morning except to assist the cook in some hurried preparations? Why, it was all as plain as could be, and every bit true, but Mrs. Van Allen wouldn't believe my explanation, and to this day she thinks I made my discoveries by gossiping with her servants.

Perhaps all this will help you to understand why I felt a sort of nervous exhilaration that had in it an element of secret pleasure when we learned that Christabel's crystal really was missing.

Mr. Haley, who was a policeman, had remained in the present room during all of the hours devoted to the wedding celebration, and after the guests had gone, he had packed up the silver, gold, and jewels and put them away in the family safe, which stood in a small dressingroom between Mrs. Farland's bedroom and Fred's. He had worn civilian's dress during the evening, and few if any of the guests knew that he was guarding the valuable gifts. The mistake had been in not telling him explicitly to care for the crystal as the most valuable gem of all, but this point had been overlooked, and the ignorant officer had assumed that it was merely a piece of cut glass of no more value than any of the carafes or decanters. When told that the ball's intrinsic value was many thousands of dollars, and that it would be next to impossible to duplicate it at any price, his amazement was unbounded, and he appeared extremely grave.

"You ought to have told me," he said. "Sure, it's a case for the chief now." Haley had been hastily telephoned for to come to Farland Hall and tell his story, and now he telephoned for the chief of police and a detective.

I felt a thrill of delight at this, for I always had longed to see a real detective in the act of detecting.

Of course everybody was greatly excited, and I just gave myself up to the enjoyment of the situation, when suddenly I remembered that Christabel had said that she would leave her crystal in my

charge and that in a way I was responsible for its safety. This changed my whole attitude, and I realized that instead of being an idly curious observer I must put all my detective instinct to work immediately and use every endeavor to recover the lost crystal.

First I flew to my own room and sat down for a few moments to collect my thoughts and lay my plans. Of course, as the windows of the present room were found in the morning fastened as they were left the night before, the theft must have been committed by someone in the house. Naturally it was not one of the family or the guests of the house. As to the servants, they all were honest and trustworthy—I had Mrs. Farland's word for that. There was no reason to suspect the policeman, and thus my process of elimination brought me to Mr. Wayne, Harold's tutor.

Of course it must have been the tutor. In nine-tenths of all the detective stories I ever have read the criminal proved to be a tutor or secretary or some sort of gentlemanly dependent of the family, and now I had come upon a detective story in real life, and here was the regulation criminal ready to fit right into it. It was the tutor, of course, but I should be discreet and not name him until I had collected some undeniable evidence.

Next I went down to the present room to search for clues. The detective had not arrived yet, and I was glad to be first on the ground, for I remembered how much importance Sherlock Holmes always attached to the first search. I didn't really expect that the tutor had left shreds of his clothing clinging to the table legs or anything absurd like that, but I fully expected to find a clue of some sort. I hoped that it wouldn't be cigar ashes, for though detectives in fiction always can tell the name and price of a cigar from a bit of ash, yet I'm so ignorant about such things that all ashes are alike to me.

I hunted carefully all over the floor, but I couldn't find a thing that seemed the least bit like a clue except a faded white carnation. Of course that wasn't an unusual thing to find the day after a wedding, but it surprised me some because it was the very flower I had given to Fred Farland the night before, and he had worn it in his buttonhole. I recognized it perfectly, for it was wired and I had twisted it a certain way when I adjusted it for him.

This didn't seem like strong evidence against the tutor, but it was convincing to me, for if Mr. Wayne was villain enough to steal Christabel's crystal, he was wicked enough to manage to get Fred's boutonniere and leave it in the room, hoping thereby to incriminate Fred. So fearful was I that this trick might make trouble for Fred

that I said nothing about the carnation, for I knew that it was in Fred's coat when he said goodnight and then we all went directly to our rooms. When the detective came, he examined the room, and I know that he didn't find anything in the way of evidence but he tried to appear as if he had, and he frowned and jotted down notes in a book after the most approved fashion.

Then he called in everybody who had been in the house overnight and questioned each one. I could see at once that his questions to the family and guests were purely perfunctory and that he too had his suspicions of the tutor.

Finally it was Mr. Wayne's turn. He always was a nervous little man, and now he seemed terribly flustered. The detective was gentle with him, and in order to set him more at ease began to converse generally on crystals. He asked Mr. Wayne if he had traveled much, if he ever had been to Japan, and if he knew much about the making and polishing of crystal balls.

The tutor fidgeted around a good deal and seemed disinclined to look the detective in the eye, but he replied that he never had been to Japan and that he never had heard of a Japanese rock crystal until he had seen Miss Farland's wedding gift, and that even then he had no idea of its great value until since its disappearance he had heard its price named.

This sounded well, but his manner was so embarrassed, and he had such an effect of a guilty man, that I felt sure my intuitions were correct and that he himself was the thief.

The detective seemed to think so, too, for he said at last, "Mr. Wayne, your words seem to indicate your innocence, but your attitudes do not. Unless you can explain why you are so agitated and apparently afraid, I shall be forced to the conclusion that you know more about this than you have admitted."

Then Mr. Wayne said, "Must I tell all I know about it, sir?"

"Certainly," said the detective.

"Then," said Mr. Wayne, "I shall have to state that when I left my room late last night to get a glass of water from the ice pitcher which always stands on the hall table I saw Mr. Fred Farland just going into the sitting room, or present room as it has been called for the last few days."

There was a dead silence. This, then, was why Mr. Wayne had acted so embarrassed, this was the explanation of my finding the white carnation there, and I think the detective thought that the sudden turn affairs had taken incriminated Fred Farland.

I didn't think so at all. The idea of Fred's stealing his own sister's wedding gift was too preposterous to be considered for a moment.

"Were you in the room late at night, Mr. Farland?" asked the detective.

"I was," said Fred.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"You didn't ask me, and as I didn't take the crystal, I saw no reason for referring to the fact that I was in the room."

"Why did you go there?"

"I went," said Fred coolly, "with the intention of taking the crystal and hiding it as a practical joke on Christabel."

"Why did you not do so?"

"Because the ball wasn't there. I didn't think then that it had been stolen but that it had been put away safely with the other valuables. Since this is not so, and the crystal is missing, we all must get to work and find it somehow before my sister returns."

The tutor seemed like a new man after Fred had spoken. His face cleared, and he appeared intelligent, alert, and entirely at his ease. "Let me help," he said. "Pray command my services in any way you choose."

But the detective didn't seem so reassured by Fred's statements. Indeed, I believe he really thought that Christabel's brother was guilty of theft.

But I believed implicitly every word Fred had uttered, and begging him to come with me, I led the way again to the sitting room. Mr. Wayne and Janet White came, too, and the four of us scrutinized the floor, walls, and furniture of the room over and over again. "There's one thing certain," I said thoughtfully. "The crystal was taken either by someone in the house or someone out of it. We've been confining our suspicions to those inside. Why not a real burglar?"

"But the windows are fastened on the inside," said Janet.

"I know it," I replied. "But if a burglar could slip a catch with a thin-bladed knife—and they often do—then he could slip it back again with the same knife and so divert suspicion."

"Bravo, Miss Frost!" said Mr. Wayne with an admiring glance at me. "You have the true detective instinct. I'll go outside and see if there are any traces."

A moment later he was on the verandah and excitedly motioning us to raise the window. Fred pushed back the catch and opened the long french window that opened on the front verandah.

"I believe Miss Frost has discovered the mystery," said Mr. Wayne, and he pointed to numerous scratches on the sash frame. The house had been painted recently, and it was seen easily that the fresh scratches were made by a thin knife blade pushed between the sashes.

"By Jove!" cried Fred, "that's it, Elinor, and the canny fellow had wit enough to push the catch back in place after he was outside again."

I said nothing for a moment. My thoughts were adjusting themselves quickly to the new situation from which I must make my deductions. I realized at once that I must give up my theory of the tutor, of course, and anyway I hadn't had a scrap of evidence against him except his fitness for the position. But given the surety of burglars from outside, I knew just what to do: look for footprints, to be sure.

I glanced around for the light snow that always falls in detective stories just before the crime is committed, and is testified, usually by the village folk, to have stopped just at the crucial moment. But there wasn't a sign of snow or rain or even dew. The verandah showed no footprints, nor could the smooth lawn or flagged walks be expected to. I leaned against the verandah railing in despair, wondering what Sherlock Holmes would do in a provoking absence of footprints, when I saw in the flowerbed beneath several well defined marks of a man's shoes.

"There you are, Fred!" I cried, and rushed excitedly down the steps.

They all followed, and, sure enough, in the soft earth of the wide flowerbed that surrounded the verandah were strong, clear prints of large masculine footgear.

"That clears us girls," cried Janet gleefully as she measured her daintily shod foot against the depressions.

"Don't touch them!" I cried. "Call Mr. Prout, the detective."

Mr. Prout appeared and, politely hiding his chagrin at not having discovered these marks before I did, proceeded to examine them closely.

"You see," he said in a pompous and dictatorial way, "there are four prints pointing toward the house and four pointing toward the street. Those pointing to the street are superimposed upon those leading to the house; hence we deduce that they were made by a burglar who crossed the flowerbed, climbed the verandah, stepped

over the rail, and entered at the window. He then returned the same way, leaving these last footprints above the others."

As all this was so palpably evident from the facts of the case, I was not impressed much by the subtlety of his deductions and asked him what he gathered from the shape of the prints.

He looked at the well defined prints intently. "They are of a medium size," he announced at last, "and I should say that they were made by a man of average height and weight who had a normal-sized foot."

Well, if that wasn't disappointing! I thought, of course, that he would tell the man's occupation and social status even if he didn't say that he was left-handed or that he stuttered, which is the kind of thing detectives in fiction always discover.

So I lost all interest in that Prout man and began to do a little deducing on my own account. Although I felt sure, as we all did, that the thief was a burglar from outside, yet I couldn't measure the shoes of an absent and unidentified burglar, and somehow I felt an uncontrollable impulse to measure shoes.

Without consulting anybody I found a tape measure and carefully measured the footprints. Then I went through the house and measured all the men's shoes I could find, from the stableboy's up to Fred's.

It's an astonishing fact, but nearly all of them fitted the measurements of the prints on the flowerbed. Men's feet are so nearly universal in size, or rather their shoes are, and too, what with extension soles and queer-shaped lasts, you can't tell anything about the size or style of a man from his footprints.

So I gave up deducing and went to talk to Fred Farland.

"Fred," I said simply, "did you take Christabel's crystal?"

"No," he answered with equal simplicity, and he looked me in the eyes so squarely and honestly that I knew he spoke the truth.

"Who did?" I next inquired.

"It was a professional burglar," said Fred, "and a mighty cute one, but I'm going to track him and get that crystal back before Christabel comes home."

"Let me help!" I cried eagerly. "I've got the true detective instinct, and I know I can do something."

"You?" said Fred incredulously. "No, you can't help, but I don't mind telling you my plan. You see, I expect Lord Hammerton down to make me a visit. He's a jolly young English chap that I chummed with in London. Now, he's a first-rate amateur detective, and

though I didn't expect him till next month, he's in New York, and I've no doubt that he'd be willing to come right off. No one will know he's doing any detecting, and I'll wager he'll lay his hands on that ball in less than a week."

"Lovely!" I exclaimed. "And I'll be here to see him do it!"

"Yes, the mater says you're to stay a fortnight or more, but mind, this is our secret."

"Trust me," I said earnestly, "but let me help if I can, won't you?"

"You'll help most by not interfering," declared Fred, and though it didn't altogether suit me, I resolved to help that way rather than not at all.

A few days later Lord Hammerton came. He was not in any way an imposing-looking man. Indeed, he was a typical Englishman of the Lord Cholmondeley type, and drawled and used a monocle most effectively. The afternoon he came we told him all about the crystal. The talk turned to detective work and detective instinct. Lord Hammerton opined in his slow, languid drawl that the true detective mind was not dependent upon instinct but was a nicely adjusted mentality that was quick to see the cause back of an effect.

Herbert Gay said that while this doubtless was so, yet it was an even chance whether the cause so skilfully deduced was the true one.

"Quite so," agreed Lord Hammerton amiably, "and that is why the detective in real life fails so often. He deduces properly the logical facts from the evidence before him, but real life and real events often are so illogical that his deductions, though true theoretically, are false from mere force of circumstances."

"And that is why," I said, "detectives in storybooks always deduce rightly because the obliging author makes the literal facts coincide with the theoretical ones."

Lord Hammerton put up his monocle and favored me with a truly British stare. "It is unusual," he remarked slowly, "to find such a clear comprehension of this subject in a feminine mind."

They all laughed at this, but I went on. "It is easy enough to make the spectacular detective of fiction show marvelous penetration and logical deduction when the antecedent circumstances are arranged carefully to prove it all, but place even Sherlock Holmes face to face with a total stranger, and I for one don't believe that he could tell anything definite about him."

"Oh, come now! I can't agree to that," said Lord Hammerton, more interestedly than he had spoken before. "I believe there is

much in the detective instinct besides the exotic and the artificial. There is a substantial basis of divination built on minute observation, and which I have picked up in some measure myself."

"Let us test that statement," cried Herbert Gay. "Here comes Mr. Wayne, Harold's tutor. Lord Hammerton never has seen him, and before Wayne even speaks, let Lord Hammerton tell us some detail which he divines by observation."

All agreed to this, and a few minutes later Mr. Wayne came up. We laughingly explained the situation to him and asked him to have himself deduced.

Lord Hammerton looked at Arthur Wayne for a few minutes and then said, still in his deliberate drawl, "You have lived in Japan for the past seven years, in government service in the interior and only recently have returned."

A sudden silence fell upon us all—not so much because Lord Hammerton made deductions from no apparent evidence but because we all knew Mr. Wayne had told Detective Prout that he never had been in Japan.

Fred Farland recovered himself first, and said, "Now that you've astonished us with your results, tell us how you attained them."

"It is simple enough," said Lord Hammerton, looking at young Wayne, who had turned deathly white. "It is simple enough, sir. The breast pocket on the outside of your coat is on the right-hand side. Now, it never is put there. Your coat is a good one—Poole or some London tailor of that class. He never made a coat with an outer breast pocket on the right side. You have had the coat turned—thus the original left-hand pocket appears now on the right side.

"Looking at you, I see that you have not the constitution which could recover from an acute attack of poverty. If you had it turned from want, you would not have your present effect of comfortable circumstances. Now, you must have had it turned because you were in a country where tailoring is not frequent but sewing and delicate manipulation easy to find. India? You are not bronzed. China? The same. Japan? Probable, but not treaty ports—there are plenty of tailors there. Hence, the interior of Japan.

"Long residence, to make it incumbent on you to get the coat turned, means government service because unattached foreigners are allowed only as tourists. Then, the cut of the coat is not so very old, and as contracts run seven or fourteen years with the Japanese, I repeat that you probably resided seven years in the interior of Japan, possibly as an irrigation engineer."

I felt sorry then for poor Mr. Wayne. Lord Hammerton's deductions were absolutely true, and coming upon the young man so suddenly he made no attempt to refute them.

And so as he had been so long in Japan, and must have been familiar with rock crystals for years, Fred questioned him sternly in reference to his false statements.

Then he broke down completely and confessed that he had taken Christabel's crystal because it had fascinated him.

He declared that he had a morbid craving for crystals, that he had crept down to the present room late that night merely to look at the wonderful, beautiful ball, that it had so possessed him that he carried it to his room to gaze at for awhile, intending to return with it after an hour or so. When he returned, he saw Fred Farland and dared not carry out his plan.

"And the footprints?" I asked eagerly.

"I made them myself," he explained with a dogged shamefacedness. "I did have a moment of temptation to keep the crystal and so tried to make you think that a burglar had taken it, but the purity and beauty of the ball itself so reproached me that I tried to return it. I didn't do so then, and since—"

"Since?" urged Fred, not unkindly.

"Well, I've been torn between fear and the desire to keep the ball. You will find it in my trunk. Here is the key."

There was a certain dignity about the young man that made him seem unlike a criminal, or even a wrongdoer.

As for me, I entirely appreciated the fact that he was hypnotized by the crystal and in a way was not responsible. I don't believe that man would steal anything else in the world.

Somehow the others agreed with me, and as they had recovered the ball, they took no steps to prosecute Mr. Wayne.

He went away at once, still in that dazed, uncertain condition. We never saw him again, but I hope for his own sake that he never was subjected to such a temptation.

Just before he left, I said to him out of sheer curiosity, "Please explain one point, Mr. Wayne. Since you opened and closed that window purposely to mislead us, since you made those footprints in the flowerbed for the same reason, and since to do it you must have gone out and then come back, why were the outgoing footprints made over the incoming ones?"

"I walked backward on purpose," said Mr. Wayne simply. □

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Jan Burke's sixth novel featuring Irene Kelly, **Hocus** (Simon & Schuster, \$22), shines with memorable characters in a front-page story that tears through to its conclusion at a heart-stopping pace. Irene is a veteran reporter for a southern California newspaper and is married to homicide detective Frank Hariman. Their relationship is suffering due to an exclusive run by Irene's paper on a local group called Hocus, which began with pranks that have now turned deadly. There's tension, therefore, across their breakfast table the morning of the day Irene learns that Hocus has abducted Frank. Authentic police procedure, credible dialogue, a heartbreaking backstory, and a thrilling plot are supported by Burke's humanity and the wholeness of her characters. **Hocus** is heads above the average thriller.

Nevada Barr's Park Ranger Anna Pigeon also makes her sixth appearance, in **Endangered Species** (Putnam, \$22.95). Anna is stationed during a drought on Cumberland Island off the coast of Georgia. Firefighting duties, nocturnal shifts assisting the sea turtles in their annual migration, and patrols of the scattered and expensive vacation properties should be enough for Anna and her team. A murder heats things up even more. As always, mature characters, an unusual setting, and some great outdoor action.

John Sandford, author of the bestselling "Prey" thrillers, has created a new set of characters and set them down in after-dark L.A. in **The Night Crew** (Putnam, \$23.95). Anna Batory is chief of a band of video freelancers who go out in their well-equipped van from ten to dawn listening to police-band radio and prowling the streets for a story they can shoot and sell to TV stations. When two apparently unrelated events in a single night act as a catalyst,

Anna must do deadly battle with a maniac. Sandford has created a cast of compelling characters who find themselves unwittingly starring in a slick and tense high-action adventure movie of their own.

Marcia Muller's latest Sharon McCone novel is rife with the best of Muller's traits—strong characters and a good mystery with a bonus of lots of lore on flying, small planes, and those who love both. **Both Ends of the Night** (Mysterious Press, \$23) opens when McCone's flight instructor Matty confesses that the man she lives with has disappeared, leaving his preteen son in her care. Sharon suspects that the man's past has caught up with him—and all too soon it catches up with Matty, too. Now Sharon and her lover Hy are set on the trail of a killer, leading to a headline story of corporate theft, government scandal, and a fight for survival in an isolated cabin in northern Minnesota. McCone heads my list of female private eyes, one of the first of her ilk and still one of the best.

Robert Crais fans will welcome **Indigo Slam** (Hyperion, \$22.95), and well they might: Elvis Cole shows a new side of his Jiminy Cricket self with his three new clients, kids ranging in age from preschool to young teenager who want him to locate their father, missing for days. Cole's investigation requires the services of his strong and silent partner Joe Pike, who finds himself in the unlikely role of babysitter. The trail to Clark Hewitt leads to the Federal Witness Protection Program, the Russian mafia in Seattle, and a Vietnamese militant organization in L.A. On the personal front, Cole's lover Lucy Chenier and her son are planning to relocate to L.A.—that is, if Lucy's spiteful ex-husband doesn't manage to ruin her job offer. Great dialogue, lots of energy, good humor, action, and a cunning plan to ensure that the good guys come out on top.

Stephen Frey (*The Takeover*) again sets his latest thriller in the world he knows best, that of high finance. In **The Inner Sanctum** a young IRS agent, Jesse Hayes, lands in the middle of a volatile conspiracy plot that could go off at any moment. Jesse's mentor and boss, who had been probing into the finances of a Senate candidate with strong views on military-industrial spending, passes along information to her mere hours before his sudden death. But he hadn't completed his investigation, so the life-and-death question is simple: who can she trust? The answer is not the obvious one, and Clancy fans should appreciate the insider's peek into boardrooms, war game rooms, and men's rooms on Capitol Hill. (Dutton, \$23.95)

April may be the cruelest month, but Alaskans call it "Breakup," which is also the title of Dana Stabenow's latest Kate Shugak mys-

tery. **Breakup** (Putnam, \$21.95) means thaw, a time of rebirth. In her isolated cabin homestead, it is more likely to be the awakening of dangerous mother bears than delicate spring flowers. For Kate, it is also the crash of a plane's engine through the roof of her cabin and the claim of her tribespeople in town that she should assume the leadership role so long held by her late Aleut grandmother. All of that is in the background as Kate entertains a friend's Boston Brahmin parents on their first visit and closes in on a suspected murderer. Reading Stabenow is akin to visiting an old and companionable friend, sharing her exotic life of wild beauty and physical hardship—but only for a spell.

Lawrence Block plods Bernie Rhodenbarr down in an Anglo-ophile's dream of a snowbound country house in **The Burglar in the Library** (Dutton, \$22.95), with witty results. Bernie hopes he has booked a romantic weekend at an expensive upstate New York b&b as a surprise for his latest girlfriend. She has a bigger surprise: she's getting married that weekend, to someone else. So Bernie invites his friend Carolyn to go with him and switches to Plan B: he will search the old mansion's library for a bookseller's version of the Holy Grail, a signed Hammett first edition inscribed to Raymond Chandler. Several flies pop up in the ointment, however: the new bride and groom have booked the same weekend, and the suspected precious volume isn't going to be easy to snatch. Oh yes, and there seems to be a serial killer shut up in the snowbound house with Bernie and Carolyn. Bernie makes great company, as always, while the Hammett-Chandler stuff and Block's variations on the country-house murder scenario will tickle fans of the genre.

How in heaven does Anne Perry continue to write the same book, only better? **Ashworth Hall** (Fawcett Columbine, \$22.95) is the latest Thomas and Charlotte Pitt mystery, and fans will be pleased to find the same surefooted plotting, familiar characters growing in unfamiliar situations, and lush period detail. The latest also has a slight change of Victorian venue, from London's streets to a grand country house where a houseparty composed of leaders from both Irish factions, Catholics and Protestants, as well as their personal guests, is being hosted by a British lord working hard to negotiate a peace in Ireland. Thomas is sent to protect the man, who's received several death threats. His wife Charlotte, born to a higher rank than the one she married into, is part of Pitt's "cover." Fans will be pleased to hear that Perry is still at the top of her form, and her use of the Irish troubles as part of her Victorian plot was inspired.

THE STORY THAT WON

The March Mysterious Photo-Jennifer Rand of Salix, Iowa. F. Peirce of Bryan, Texas; Pennsylvania; William Sef-Robert V. Kesling of Ann Arbor, Manchester, New Hampshire; Lesa Neace of Dawn Thompson of Omaha, Nebraska; J. N. Pechota of Dulzura, California; and Alfred W. Cross of Sacramento, California.



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Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

CONFESSOR'S PARK by Jennifer Rand

A frantic man burst through the door of the police station. "I admit it, I killed my wife in the park last night. Now get this off my forehead."

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"Yes, anything, I'll do anything."

The man led the police chief to Apple Park. Only a few yards away stood the statue of Father Christenson.

The police chief stood smiling in front of the statue. "Well, Father, you always did have a way of getting people to confess. I'm sure glad I never did anything wrong."

The murderer was shocked at first, then became amused, when the word LIAR began showing up across the police chief's brow.

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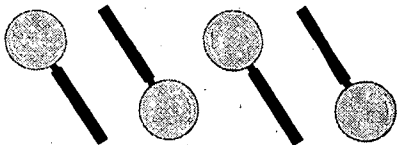
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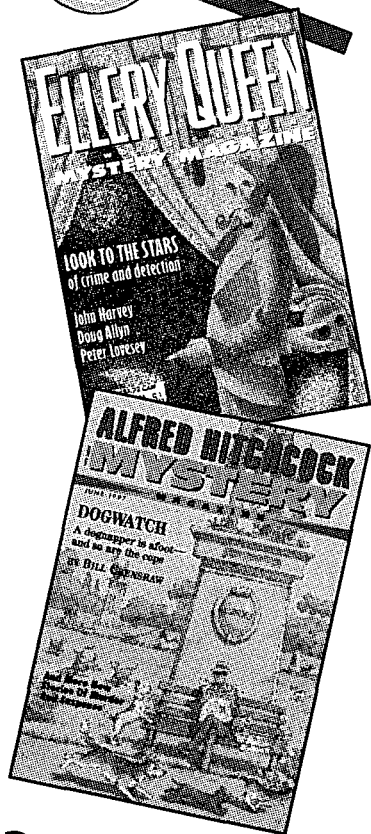
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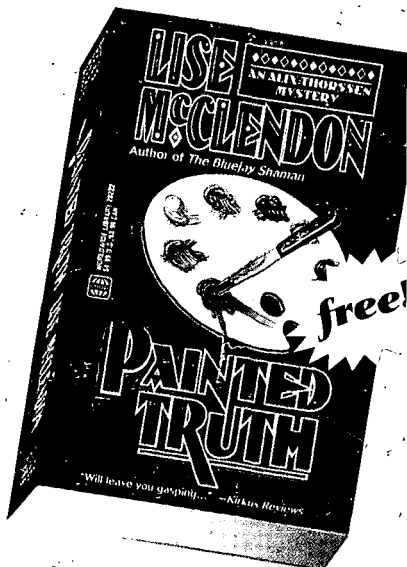
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